

HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

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Romances

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LINDA RODGER
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THIS MONTH
"GREAT
RIES!"

All In The Family	HEATHER G. POZZESSERE
Thanksgiving Prayer	DEBBIE MACOMBER
Wit and Wisdom	SHIRLEY LARSON
There Must Be Love	SAMANTHA DAY



HEATHER GRAHAM POZZESSERE

New York Times bestselling author

Heather Graham Pozzessere has seventy titles to her credit and over ten million books in print. Heather has won numerous awards from the Romance Writers of America, Waldenbooks and *Romantic Times*—to name just a few. A full-time wife, mother of five, and, of course, a writer of historical and contemporary romances, Heather says, “I just absolutely love what I do.”

DEBBIE MACOMBER

Debbie Macomber hails from the state of Washington. As a busy wife and mother of four, she strives to keep her family healthy and happy. As a prolific author of dozens of bestselling romance novels, she strives to keep her readers happy with each new book she writes.



SHIRLEY LARSON

Former teacher Shirley Larson has written twenty romance novels. Even though it's sometimes lonely and frustrating work, she loves to write. She's dedicated to her work and feels a very special bond with the people who love romance novels just as much as she does.

SAMANTHA DAY

Samantha Day, a Canadian author, started work on her first novel—a futuristic story, complete with romantic hero and heroine—when she was fourteen years old. Having long perfected the art of daydreaming, she now shares her fantasies with a devoted readership and makes romance writing her full-time occupation.

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

As the cool autumn breeze filters through the windows, caressing everything it sweeps by, I can't wait for my own midnight tryst planned with my special one!

But for now, I'm watching the leaves drift down—just the right setting for enjoying some romantic reading as...two hearts collide in anger to create an explosion of love and passion...a determined medical student throws caution to the wind to follow the man who holds her heart...a stand-up comic and a witty science teacher find that their desire for each other is no laughing matter...and a librarian who wants it all—love, commitment and marriage—falls for the one man who believes that that's a mistake far too many people make!

Get ready to be spellbound with this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, and join me in making every day one to remember!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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HEATHER G. POZZESSERE

All In The Family



Kelly and Dan are single parents whose
teenage son and daughter have fallen in love.
Can love bridge the generation gap?



She had been watching him for a long time when she finally came to the fence that day. She'd seen him first in the hallway with his friends, and had noticed his hair. Not just blond, it was nearly white, and one lock slashed across the tan of his forehead like a silk ribbon. And his eyes, blue like the sky, were as startling and arresting as that hair.

He was about six-foot-two and should have been a California beachboy, not a West Virginia mountain man from Bolivar.

Yet it had been his smile that had really drawn her. They had seen each other on her very first day, across the crowded hallway. Their eyes had met, and the world had stopped. Suddenly there was no one else, no one who mattered. . . .

A whistle shrilled, and the boys went running off the field. But he remained. He tossed the football up in the air, caught it, tossed it again, caught it. And then he walked toward her.

He reached the fence, and they stood just inches apart.

She was in love. Head over heels in love, and she would never love again as she did at this moment. They watched each other with all their feelings in their eyes.

"You're Sandy Marquette," he said at last.

"You know my name."

He smiled. "I know everything about you. You've just moved here

from D.C., your father is some kind of historian and. . ."

His voice trailed away. Then that smile touched his face again. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. You must be here to break the hearts of all us poor mountain boys."

She laughed, a husky sound that caught in her throat. "I'd take a mountain man anytime."

It wasn't meant to be sexy; she was just being honest. She barely knew him—all she knew were those looks that had passed between them.

"This mountain man?" he inquired softly.

"No other. Ever," she whispered.

The spring breeze picked up, touching them both. His fingers curled over hers where they clung to the fencing. Just touching.

"I've got to shower," he finally told her.

"I'll wait."

When he walked back to meet her at the fence, they smiled again. She was sophisticated, he told himself. She was superior to anything that had ever touched his life before.

Hold something back, she warned herself. He was the most popular guy in school, and she was just the new girl. She had to be careful. . . .

That slow smile lighted his face again, and he held out his hand, watching her eyes as their fingers intertwined.

"Want—" He had to clear his throat. "A soda or—"

"I don't care. I don't care what we do."

"We could drive—" he began, then laughed. "Except that I don't have a car. I came with Pete, then I took one look at you and forgot everything."

"I have mine," she said.

She led him to the parking lot and her red sports car.

He groaned inwardly. She was a rich girl, and he...

She handed him the keys. He drove to a quiet place by the river and parked. They talked, and finally darkness fell.

He talked about the river and the cabin up in the mountains by the stream. He told her about the deer that would eat right out of your hand, and about how when a fire crackled in the hearth and night descended, there was no better place to be. She tried to tell him about her life, but couldn't think of much to say, because it felt as if nothing before him mattered.

He began to dream of her, awake and asleep. He was going to marry her. As soon as possible.

He told her so the next day. At first she was stunned, but then she hugged him. Then the bell began to ring for class.

That afternoon, they wandered to the stream by the cabin. They wound up laughing and showering each other with the cold mountain water. He built a fire to warm them up.

By its gentle light they gazed into each other's eyes, and then he touched her, and then...

Love led the way for her, a gentle, tender path to an ecstasy that was both sweet and torrid.

She'd known she belonged to him since their eyes had met across the hall, but now she felt as if he would be a part of her forever. They would marry, yet marriage could be only a legal sanction of what they had already shared.

*

"TAKE THAT, you dastardly, devilish dragon!"

Kelly tried the words aloud, shrugged, grimaced, then added more pencil strokes to her paper.

Umm. Hard to judge. But this installment of the children's comic, *Dark of the Moon*, was due tomorrow, and she simply had to take care of the Fairy Queen and Daryl the Devilish Dragon by tonight.

The doorbell began ringing. Kelly looked up in disgust. "Jarod!"

Was he even home? Maybe he'd forgotten his key. He was very forgetful lately.

Kelly padded barefoot to the door. She should have looked through the peephole, but she was annoyed at having been interrupted, so she merely threw the door open.

"Where's your father? I want to see him now!"

Kelly felt fury settle over her as she stared up at a total stranger. His hair was dark auburn, and he wasn't just tall; he was solidly built.

He had flashing dark eyes, a straight nose, and a square jaw. And he looked as furious as Kelly felt. He might have been handsome if his features hadn't been so hard and angry.

"Where is your father!" The words thundered out again.

"My father, sir, is in Vancouver—I believe. I don't keep a schedule of his whereabouts."

"Get me your mother then. Now—please."

A sigh of irritation escaped her, and she felt her own temper rise as he brushed past her into the hallway of the old house, critically surveying everything in sight.

Kelly set her jaw grimly. "My mother is deceased. Now, since you've barged into my home—"

"You live here alone?" he demanded.

"Not exactly. I live with my son."

"You're his mother!"

He spoke with such astonishment that Kelly paused. "If being 'his' mother means Jarod McGraw's, then yes. Now—"

"Where's your husband?"

Kelly gritted her teeth, wishing that she had the size and strength to pick the man up by his collar and deliver him outside. She said, "Also deceased, I'm afraid. So, since you've barged so rudely into my house, I suggest you tell me your business. Otherwise I'll feel obliged to call the police."

He didn't scare easily. But then, he didn't smile, either. "I've been considering the possibility of calling in the police myself, Mrs. McGraw. But, please do call them," he drawled. "I really don't know that much about the law. The charge might be statutory rape."

"What—what are you talking about?" Kelly asked.

"Rape, Mrs. McGraw. Statutory. Your son Jarod."

"Jarod? Never! I don't know who or what—"

"Who? My daughter, that's who, Mrs. McGraw. An innocent young girl with a good head on her shoulders until your barbarian of a half-back—"

"Jarod has more manners and style in his little finger than you'll ever have in your entire body, mister! Now if your little tart of a daughter offered herself—"

"Lady, don't you ever—" He reached her in a single stride, and his hands fell on her shoulders. But suddenly he seemed to realize his anger and potential for violence. He drew his hands back and stared at them.

Perhaps we're both barbarians, Kelly thought. Parents defending their offspring.

"Don't you ever come flaming in here like a torch again, attacking Jarod! You have no right. You can't—"

She broke off as the front door flew open.

Jarod was there.

Beautiful, tall, blond Jarod, a frown furrowing his handsome brow. "Mom?" He said the word as a question.

"Jarod?" the stranger asked him.

Jarod nodded. And then Kelly began to feel ill. Something like recognition had entered her son's eyes.

"Sandy?" he gasped. "You're Mr. Marquette, Sandy's father, aren't you?" Jarod asked the stranger. "Nothing's happened, has it? There hasn't been an accident or anything?"

"No," Marquette said with deceptive calm. "Sandy is pregnant."

Jarod hadn't known that, Kelly realized. He stumbled slightly, turning white.

He looked broken. Well, he should, Kelly thought. He wasn't even eighteen. Every promise in the world lay open to him. Destroyed, if this was true.

She reeled under a new onslaught of fury. There was Marquette, so convinced of his little girl's innocence. Well, it couldn't be true! Marquette's precious daughter might have been running around with the entire senior class, and chosen Jarod's name simply because he was every young girl's fantasy!

Kelly said scornfully, "Come on, Mr. Marquette. Perhaps we *should* call in the police. Or perhaps you should take greater care with your accusations. The father is so often the last to know."

"Just what do you mean, Mrs. McGraw?"

"What I'm saying, Mr. Marquette, is that your daughter might have seduced not only my son, but half of the senior class. What I'm saying is that—"

Kelly wasn't sure quite what happened then. Marquette stiffened, the expression on his face explosive, and took a step forward. Jarod let out a gasp and came charging in. He swung at Marquette who ducked, then straightened.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. McGraw," Marquette said suddenly. Kelly stared at him, a bit incredulous at his change.

But he hadn't really changed, she thought. He was just more polite.

"I shouldn't have come over this way. I'm afraid I reacted out of pure

anger. I wanted to be reasonable, and I wasn't."

Kelly lowered her head, wishing that they had remained on the battleground, because now she was forced to admit that she had replied in kind. She had all but called his daughter a little whore, and really, she didn't normally behave that way, either....

"I'll leave you now. I'll call, to see when we can discuss this situation."

To Kelly's amazement, Marquette turned and strode from the room.

Jarod called, "Mr. Marquette! Wait, please!"

The man was already out the front door, but he paused on the walkway. Jarod leaned down and kissed Kelly's forehead, looking at her anxiously. "I'm sorry, Mom. I've never been so sorry about anything in my entire life. Honest to God. But I've got to go. I have to see Sandy. She's—she's pregnant. She's going to have my baby."

He kissed her forehead again, then started for the door to catch up with Marquette.

"Jarod, wait! This is serious! We have to talk."

"Mother, please! I just have to see that Sandy is all right! I'll be back, and then we'll talk."

The door banged. Kelly could see them through the window: her tall, handsome son, and the even taller red-haired man. Leaving together.

"Jarod, I'll...I'll clobber you for this!" she swore. And then she started to think about Marquette again. "Damn you, Jarod! If you had to get a girl pregnant, couldn't you have picked one with a different father?"

Then she started to laugh, because the thought was so ridiculous. And then, all alone, she started to cry.

Because it was just like history repeating itself, and she didn't know if she sympathized more with her own son—or with the girl she had never seen.

IN THE END, Kelly returned to her drawings. She turned Daryl the Devilish Dragon into a new type of monster—one with Marquette's face—and she let Esmeralda, the Fairy Queen, chase him around with a fat wooden spoon, catch him, tie him up and clobber him.

Of course, she had to get some *real* work done. And letting Esmeralda behave so violently would never do. But it had felt awfully good for the moment.

"Work!" she murmured aloud disgustedly. Who could work when her teenage son was likely to be slapped with a paternity suit?

She threw down her pencil, but just when she thought she would scream, the front door opened and Jarod came into the house.

He looked dazed. Starry-eyed. He was smiling a dizzy type of smile. He was completely gone over this girl who had just destroyed his life. Kelly wanted to slap him, but before she could even talk, he came and knelt before her, taking her hand in such a way that all her anger escaped.

"Mom, I *am* sorry, very sorry, for the way I've disappointed you," he said softly.

She jerked her hand away. She couldn't be soft—not now. "Jarod, really, get off the ground, please!"

He did, and she found herself growing annoyed all over again. He was sorry, but not for the deed, only because she was upset.

"Jarod—" she began, "don't you see what you've done?"

It took him a long while to answer.

"I love her, Mom," he finally said. She didn't say anything, and he hesitated again.

Then, "Mom, you don't know her," he said. "You have no right to judge her."

"I'm not judging her! If she were a saint, you'd still be in the middle of a disaster!"

"A child isn't a disaster, Mother."

Great. All she needed was Jarod preaching to her—and sounding ridiculously wise.

"Jarod, I know that. But a child is a tremendous responsibility. A baby is constant, Jarod. It won't wait, unattended, while you go to school, to football practice, to a concert with your friends. Then there are the hospital costs, the pediatrician, the diapers—"

"Mom, I know all that!"

"And?" She turned around, one brow arched.

"I'll deal with it."

"You're not even out of high school!"

Kelly didn't want to alienate him—she wanted to help him. But he was being so blasé!

He returned her stare evenly. "When the baby is born, I'll be out of high school."

"College lies ahead of you, Jarod. Four years of it."

He shrugged. "If I have to wait, I will."

"What will you do in the meantime?"

"Get a job."

"Doing what? *Doing what?*" Her voice was rising. "Oh, Jarod. And what about Sandy? Think about her for a moment, saddled with an infant. What if they won't let her finish high school? What about college for her? What about *her* dreams?"

"Do you want Sandy to get an abortion?" Jarod broke in coolly.

She winced, closing her eyes. No, she didn't want that. She couldn't bear the thought. Still, this wasn't her life they were discussing. It was Jarod's life, and Sandy's.

"Mother?" he pressed softly.

"Don't, Jarod. Don't push me. I'm not saying that. Besides, what I want doesn't matter. What's best for the both of you is what matters. We've just got to—well, we've got to really discuss it."

"Mom..."

His voice was very soft, and he was on his knees again, beside her chair, and they were hugging each other. She found that she was crying again, smoothing back his beautiful blond hair. "I just had such dreams for you! And maybe that wasn't fair. I can't dream your dreams for you—that's your own right...."

Jarod looked up at her, taking both of her hands in his. "I love you," he told her. "I didn't want to leave you, but I had to see Sandy. The way her father came in... well, I had to tell her that I really loved her. That I'd never cop out on her."

Kelly nodded feebly.

"It's going to be okay. We're going to talk. All of us, okay?"

"All of us?" Kelly frowned.

"Sandy—oh, wait till you meet her. She's wonderful! Me, you, Mr. Marquette."

"What about Sandy's mother?"

"She doesn't have a mother right now. Just her father. And he's asked us over for dinner tomorrow night. It's the next step. Mr. Marquette said so."

"Mr. Marquette said so," Kelly mimicked. "Well, at least you're not calling that awful man 'Dad'—yet," Kelly murmured.

*

"YOU'RE NOT going to wear *that*, are you?"

Halfway down the stairs, Kelly paused to face her son.

"What's the matter with it, Jarod?"

"You look like—someone's mother," he said unhappily.

"Jarod, I *am* someone's mother."

"Grandmother, then. Mom, you look like a nun."

Kelly smiled vaguely and continued on down. She knew she didn't look that prim. Her skirt was long and her blouse had a Chinese collar, but it was a silky teal blue that was becoming to her eyes and hair.

"Jarod, my outfit is fine," she said. "You're determined to marry Sandra, and I don't want to meet my prospective daughter-in-law looking like Bubbles La Tour. Now, get the car, dear."

He gave her one last exasperated glance, then went outside. Kelly turned to the hall mirror to give herself a quick once-over.

Was she dressed too old? Maybe, but her height was such a drawback when she was trying to stand her

ground, and she must—maturely—tonight.

She had her hair piled on top of her head. Her heels were three inches high, but she still felt short. "That's your fault, Jarod!" she said heatedly. It was impossible to feel tall around him.

He beeped the horn, and she gave herself a little shake. Face it, she told herself wryly, Marquette had mistaken her for a child at their first meeting, and she was determined to prove to that obnoxious individual that she was not—in the least—a child.

Kelly gasped at her first sight of the Marquette house. It seemed to rise naturally from the mountain, all granite and redwood and glass, immense and beautiful. From the driveway she could see the living room, with its walls of glass, and through that glass the stone fireplace, the warm earth tones of the Indian rugs and casual furniture.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Jarod demanded a little smugly.

Kelly turned on him. "I thought Marquette was some kind of historian. You didn't tell me that he was well-off. And don't you dare sound so smug. This doesn't change anything."

"Mom, you're just so worried about money! We won't starve. Don't you see—"

"If you take a penny of his money, Jarod, I will be so disappointed in you that I'll—I'll scream."

The front door opened before they could reach it. Marquette was standing there. Kelly hesitated, but Jarod's touch got her moving again.

Marquette looked . . . good.

Really good. He had on a light, casual jacket, a shirt open at the neck, and nicely tailored trousers. He smiled when she came nearer, a deep, inviting smile, and she realized that he was handsome, very handsome. With those dark eyes of his and the white slash of his smile against his bronzed, rugged features, he was alluring . . . and exciting!

"Jarod, Mrs. McGraw, come in."

Marquette took her hand in one of his, and his scent, from some kind of clean, woody soap, seemed to wash over her. She wanted to shriek, let go of my hand! And even in heels she had to tilt her head back to meet his sardonic smile.

"Mom," Jarod prodded her. "This is Sandy."

Kelly didn't know what she had been expecting, but Sandy was, quite simply, beautiful. She was dark, like her father, with big dark eyes, and long hair that was one of the richest shades of auburn Kelly had ever seen. She was tall, too. About five-foot-nine—how irritating!

The whole world suddenly seemed tall! Kelly felt a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Here she was, so tiny, with a bunch of normal-size people, as if she had eaten something strange.

"Sandy, how do you do?"

She offered the words softly, and gave the girl her hand with a nice smile. How could you be so perfect? she thought in despair. You've ruined his life!

"Can I get you a drink?" Marquette said.

"Ah, yes, thank you," Kelly murmured.

Unlike her, Dan Marquette was perfectly at ease. "Come into the kitchen with me, Mrs. McGraw."

Sandy and Jarod were staring at each other, oblivious to anyone else. Kelly glanced at them uneasily, then followed Dan Marquette.

The kitchen, too, was beautifully contemporary. Light oak cabinets, a big butcher-block island, restaurant range, rows of gleaming copper pots, and a booth against another glass wall.

Kelly wandered over to the window as Dan got ice from the freezer. She could feel him watching her all the while.

"What will you have?"

"Wine. A spritzer or a cooler, something like that."

He poured wine and soda over ice and offered her the glass, his own amusement so evident that Kelly snapped at him. "What do you find so funny?"

"You, Mrs. McGraw. You are appalled that we've left the children together. Alone."

"Yes, I guess I am," Kelly replied coolly.

"Aren't you trying to close the barn door after the horse?"

"Are you trying to encourage outrageous behavior?"

"Not so outrageous. Natural, I believe. Just how old are you, Mrs. McGraw?"

"What?" Kelly gasped. "It's none of your business!"

"Oh, but I think it is. You're condemning those kids, when you were apparently running around yourself at a very young age—"

"It's none of your business!" Kelly repeated in fury. She slammed her glass down so hard that it shattered, but she barely noticed. She stared at Marquette.

"You're just a kid yourself, aren't you?" he asked softly. "That makes this whole thing very hard."

"Mr. Marquette, I'm not a kid. I'm unhappy about this entire situation because it's going to be very, very hard on those two children!"

He listened to her, then turned quickly away, moving into the pantry to get a broom, and clean up the glass she had shattered. She moved to help him, and as she did so, she slipped on the wet floor and fell to her knees. She winced sharply; some glass had cut into her knee.

Marquette, instantly concerned, put his hand on her shoulder.

"Just let me go. The glass—"

But he stood, and she found herself swept up into his strong arms. Instinctively she wound her own arms around his neck for balance.

"It's nothing."

"It's deep."

He set her down at the table and quickly reached into a cabinet for antiseptic and a bandage.

"It's nothing, really."

"The stocking has to go," he murmured, his hand on her leg. Kelly leaped up, found her garter, and released the offending garment. Marquette removed her shoe and was sliding the stocking down her leg as Jarod and Sandy made their appearance in the kitchen.

"Mother!" Jarod said.

"Dad...?" Sandy queried.

Kelly felt color flooding her entire body. She was sitting, Dan Marquette at her feet.

"Your mom's glass broke," he said smoothly, picking up the antiseptic. "She cut her knee."

Kelly was sure that she could have heard a pin drop, but Dan just daubed the antiseptic on her knee attentively.

"Is it okay, Mom?" Jarod asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes, really. I, uh, I—"

"Sandy, do me a favor, please?" Marquette asked her. "Finish picking up that glass. Jarod, why don't you make your mom another spritzer?"

Sandy began to clean up, while Jarod made Kelly a drink and brought it over. She sipped it quickly, and her vision swam for a moment. All she saw was that dark masculine head bent over her knee, and her impulse was to run her fingers through that thick hair. They actually itched to touch him.

"There, that should do it." Marquette looked up at her. He was smiling. A devilish, fascinating smile. Then he rose.

"Jarod, the salad is in the refrigerator. Sandy, you check on the roast and the potatoes."

Sandy laughed. "Hey, Dad! What's your job here?"

"I'm going to help Mrs. McGraw hobble out to the table. That other shoe needs to go, too." He was already slipping it off.

"How do you ever walk in these things, anyway?"

"I manage fine," Kelly retorted. He grinned, offering her his hand.

"Her name is Kelly," Jarod offered.

"Kelly," Dan Marquette murmured. "Nice. Irish . . . green."

"Short," Jarod teased.

"Jarod!" Kelly gave him a sharp warning. But Marquette's hand was out, and she had little choice but to accept it. He led her out—barefoot—to the dining room, a beautiful room simply decorated in an Oriental style.

When everyone was seated, Jarod glanced at Dan Marquette and his mother, then mouthed out a quick grace. Then he commented on how delicious the food was and Kelly found herself echoing the sentiment. She asked Dan whether he or Sandy had done the cooking.

"Neither," he responded. "Reeves is the cook."

"Reeves has been with us all my life," Sandy explained. "What is he, Dad? Sort of a gentleman's gentleman, I suppose. After all these years he's still very proper and very British. He's great."

Reeves apparently had his own room at the back of the house.

"He needs a certain independence," Sandy explained.

"I think we're all done with our salad," Dan murmured. Sandy and Jarod collected the plates and disappeared into the kitchen. Kelly felt Dan Marquette staring at her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong?" She sipped her spritzer. "What could be wrong? Those two are children, with no apparent sense of responsibility, and they're going to have a child. Unless—"

"Unless?" Marquette was smiling, but his dark eyes were narrowed as he leaned closer. "What are you suggesting, Mrs. McGraw? That Sandra have an abortion?"

His blunt suggestion made her color again. "I'm thinking of your daughter more than of my son," she said flatly. "Both their lives will have to change, but it's the woman who bears the brunt of whatever comes."

He leaned back again, watching her. "I think you're missing the main point here, Kelly. These two know what they're going to do. We can be their friends or their enemies, but we can't change their minds."

Sandy came back in with a smile that quickly faded when she saw the way the adults were looking at each other.

Jarod sailed back in with a huge platter of parsleyed potatoes and broccoli in cheese sauce. His smile faded, too.

Kelly looked down at her plate as Dan carved the roast. She was vaguely aware that he had started using her first name when he asked for her plate and piled it high with food.

They all sat down to eat in silence.

"Mrs. McGraw, your glass is empty," Sandy said softly. "Can I fix you another drink?"

Kelly smiled. "Are you trying to ply me with liquor? Ask Jarod—my tongue just gets sharper."

Sandy flushed and laughed, and Jarod assured her that they were going to hear from his mother one way or another that evening, anyway. Dan Marquette disappeared with both glasses, returning with them

refilled, and Kelly suddenly felt more comfortable.

"Sandy, I'll start off with the tough stuff," Kelly began. "I admit that I'm deeply disappointed in both of you. You seem like a lovely young lady, but what you did was—"

"Mother," Jarod interrupted. "Come on! We're seniors. Everyone—"

"Everyone?" Kelly murmured. "'Everyone' isn't expecting a child, and 'everyone'—"

"Well, Mom, we weren't planning what happened the first time!"

"You were careless and irresponsible!" Kelly retorted. "And now you act like you're being Mr. Magnanimous, Jarod! Sandy is going to do most of the paying—have you thought about that? Sandy, have you thought about it? I can't change your minds and I'll be honest, I don't know what the 'right' thing really is. But, Sandy, you have options. You don't have to have this baby—and none of us has the right to make you!"

Sandy had gone ashen. Marquette looked as if he were about to explode and Jarod seemed ready to strangle his mother, but Kelly kept going. This was for Sandy, between the two of them as women.

"Or you could give the baby up for adoption."

"Oh, my God!" Sandy whispered, close to tears.

Kelly leaned closer to the girl. "I wouldn't want that, Sandy. That baby is my grandchild. To be honest, what I want is for you and Jarod to marry each other. It's just that it's going to be miserably hard. I want you to see that. I want you both to

see your options, and then, once you two make your decision, I swear that I'll back you and help you in any way that I can. If I've hurt you, I'm sorry."

There was silence, complete silence. Then Sandy burst into tears and raced from the room, Jarod behind her.

From somewhere Kelly heard a clock chime. Dan Marquette was still, but Kelly couldn't look at him.

She heard him rise, then walk over to the window. Felt him when he turned to watch her.

"Are you going to rip into me for hurting your daughter? Go ahead. But everything I said was important and—"

"Yes, it was." He was smiling at her. "It is going to be hard, and it is important that they think about what they're doing."

He came back to the table and sat down next to her. Kelly felt as if the temperature in the room had risen by ten degrees. She could feel his smile, feel those dark eyes.

"You don't want to talk to me, Kelly McGraw, but I know you were ridiculously young when you had Jarod. How old are you now? Thirty-five?"

"Forty-five!" Kelly lied quickly.

He only laughed again. "Things went badly for you—I'm sorry. But you should know that things that start off well can go badly, too. Sandy was planned, Kelly. Her mother and I met in college. We got married right after graduation. Sandy was born a year after our wedding day. But her mother left when Sandy was five days old. So much for planning. I think Jarod

loves Sandy—and I know she loves him. Yes, it's going to be hard. Let's help them make it, shall we?"

She turned slowly to stare at him. At the dark eyes gazing so intently into her own. At that smile. His hand was stretched toward her. He wanted her to take it.

Kelly stared from his hand to his eyes. "We still haven't gotten anywhere here," she murmured. "They have to finish their senior year. We have to decide how to—handle this!"

Kelly looked at him, suddenly wide-eyed with confusion. There really was so much to do!

"It will go much better," Marquette murmured, "if you and I are friends. Don't you think?"

His hand closed over hers, and Kelly stared at it.

No, she thought. No, no, no...

She realized that she was afraid to be his friend. He would demand a great deal of a... friend.

KELLY LET herself into the house smiling. She felt so much better about things.

"Jarod!"

He came running down the stairs, a pencil stuck behind his ear. That made her feel better, too. He hadn't forgotten about his schoolwork.

She could even admit that since everything had come out in the open, especially since they'd gone to the Marquettes' for dinner, Jarod had been doing better. Straight A's in school, and a note from the coach stating that by the time the season was over, he would be able to attend the college of his choice on an athletic scholarship alone.

"Well?" he asked her anxiously.

She smiled. Well, why not? Sandy Marquette was going to be Sandra McGraw soon enough. It would be foolish, Kelly had decided, not to enjoy her only son's wedding.

Kelly smiled, threw her arms open to Jarod. "The priest says that the first Saturday in June will be fine."

"Super!"

He accepted her embrace, then whirled her around the hallway.

"Well, what did he say? Did you tell him that Sandy... I mean, did you explain—"

"I didn't lie, Jarod." But Kelly couldn't help grinning. "The man is a Roman Catholic priest, so he was glad that you two are going to get married."

"By June..."

"By June Sandy will be about four and a half months along. Not necessarily noticeable at all." Kelly shrugged. "If people know, they know. If they don't—well, we won't announce it. This is a once in a lifetime affair. Sandy should have a beautiful white dress and a mile-long train, the whole nine yards."

Jarod looked at her anxiously. "You really think so?"

"Definitely."

He hugged her again. "Sandy will be thrilled."

"Why don't you call her and tell her?"

"She's on her way over now."

"Now? Why?"

"Oh—I forgot. They're both coming. We're all going out," Jarod said happily.

Kelly shook her head. "Uh-uh! You all can go out, but—"

"Mom, I said you'd go. I told Dan that you loved tubing, that you loved anything to do with the water."

"Jarod, you can't run around telling—"

"Mom, please, for my sake, for Sandy's sake. Come on, they've just moved here. From D.C. Going tubing is new and exciting for them."

The doorbell chose that moment to ring. Kelly stared at Jarod; he stared at her. Kelly went to answer it.

Sandy, her beautiful dark eyes bright with pleasure, greeted her. She was in a bathing suit, and she looked so young and lovely that Kelly had to smile.

"Oh! You're not ready!" Sandy said.

Kelly smiled. "I'm not coming, Sandy. I've really got an awful lot to do."

"Oh, come on! Please. Dad just got the tubes. And he already dropped off the meat for the barbecue at the cottage. Please? He won't come if you don't."

"What's wrong?" It was the man himself, in a pair of cutoffs that left very little to the imagination.

How old are *you*? she wondered, unaware that she was staring at his bare chest. Thickly covered with hair and hard with muscle.

He should have been skinny! Weren't scholars supposed to be pale and scrawny, with horn-rims and...

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"No, I'm just a little busy today, that's all."

He shrugged. "What a shame. The kids had said that you could go. I guess I'll stay home, too. Third wheel, you know."

"That's foolish," Kelly protested. "Sandy said you'd set up for a barbecue at some cottage."

"I bought a little house along the Shenandoah. I'm just fascinated by the river."

Kelly kept smiling. "All the more reason why you should go."

Jarod came up behind Kelly and whispered in her ear. "See, Mom, if you don't go, he won't go. And Sandy and I will be all alone."

She spun around. "Not amusing, Jarod. You're in no position to be giving me that kind of grief, young man."

He grinned and grabbed Sandy's arm.

"We'll be in the car, Dad!" Sandy called.

"Are you coming or not?" Marquette asked Kelly very softly.

Damn him! He knew darn well that he made her uneasy. That she was much more aware of him as a man than she wanted to be.

"Can't handle the big time, huh?" he dared her.

She certainly couldn't let herself retreat after that. "Step inside, Mr. Marquette," she said smoothly. "I'll just be a moment."

A FEW minutes after leaving, they were in the river. Jarod and Sandy were drifting along behind them—their hands entwined. Dan Marquette was quite relaxed, as if he'd been tubing all his life. His head was back, his feet dangling in the water, and an extra tube containing an ice chest was tied to his. Kelly shrugged and leaned back.

Dan took a look at the kids, then smiled at Kelly. He pulled his second tube closer and dug into the ice.

"Beer, Mrs. McGraw?"

"Thank you, Mr. Marquette."

She smiled as she sipped it, then leaned back and rested her head against her tube. The river was easy here; the current was slow, but she grinned to herself. Washington city dweller. Wait until they hit the rapids! The water was a little bit low, and maneuvering over the rocks might turn out to be tricky.

She opened her eyes. "Just what do you do for a living, Mr. Marquette?"

He shrugged. "I write—historical pieces, nonfiction."

Kelly lifted an eyebrow. "You seem to do rather well at it."

He laughed. "I've never had anything on the *New York Times*' best-seller list. But what I write doesn't change. Universities order so many a year." He sipped his beer and went on to tell her that he had been doing a book on early American life in Washington. He liked this area because it offered easy access to so many of his research sources.

Kelly found herself warming to the subject, telling him how things had changed since she'd been little, how the National Park Service had really saved the area after numerous floods. She told him that he would have to go on the "ghost tour," and started to list some of the books the local small press had published.

"You know quite a bit about the region, don't you?" he asked her.

"West Virginia, born and bred."

She laughed.

Laughter from behind distracted her, and she turned to see a group of people on a raft passing by. They were all throwing water at each other. Someone missed and hit Sandy, who shrieked with laughter; Jarod responded by dousing the group on the raft.

Watching it all, Kelly smiled, then rested her head against the tube again. It really was fun. Had it been almost eighteen years since she had felt like laughing this way? Eighteen years since she and David had been like Jarod and Sandy—so young, and so much in love with love! But they hadn't gotten much help. Her mother had been dead, and David's parents had been furious. She and David had started out with nothing, and she'd spent almost five years rushing from work to pick up Jarod and back to work.

Not too much time for love, either. They had both been too tired. David from his schoolwork and his part-time job; she from her nine-to-five job and trying to be a loving parent in the hours that were left. And then David had gotten out of school, and it had been her turn to start studying art.

Hard...everything had been so hard. And then, ironically, as soon as she had finished school—another five-year span—David had gotten into that stupid hang-gliding club and...died.

Almost seven years ago. Years in which everything had gone on being hard. Raising Jarod alone, worrying about the bills, wishing she had majored in something more practical than art....

"A penny for them. Hell, I'd even give you a dollar." Dan Marquette was staring at her intently.

"They wouldn't be worth it," she told him. And then grinned. "Rapid coming up," she said lightly.

He nodded.

Kelly smiled serenely as her tube began to pick up speed. She maneuvered skillfully past the rocks, loving the cool spray against her face. She heard a shriek behind her and saw that Jarod had just saved Sandy from capsizing.

Dan Marquette was still there, serenely sipping his beer, undaunted by the rapids.

He laughed. "What's the matter, Mrs. McGraw? Was I supposed to have been dashed to bits?"

"Of course not!" she retorted. She lay back again and let the water carry her along. It felt so good!

Suddenly her tube got snagged on a submerged branch, and she was plunged face downward into the river, with her tube flying off into the distance.

Coughing and sputtering, she came to the surface. The water was no more than four feet deep, and she ended up sprawling across a rock.

And he was leaning over her. His hands were resting on either side of her face, and she could feel the heat of his body.

He leaned closer. "You missed that branch, Mrs. McGraw."

There really was no other choice. She made a frenzied swish with her hand and sent a wall of water flying up into his handsome face.

He coughed; he sputtered. And then she was lifted off the rock and

dragged beneath the water. In defense she grabbed at his legs.

"Oh!"

She came up for air, only to find herself dragged below again, then back up, gasping. Finally she was dragged to shore and laid out flat, with the sun shining through the tree branches and Dan Marquette stretched above her.

She was smiling, she realized. Smiling and laughing and staring into his dark eyes.

She was dying to touch him. She inhaled sharply, and held her breath, then realized that he was staring down at her, his breath held too. The dark flame in his eyes was the flame of desire, and the heat that emanated from his body was something like... need.

"Kelly..."

He reached out and touched her, running his thumb over her lower lip, brushing his knuckles over her throat. And she couldn't protest. Didn't want to.

Not at all. Something was growing in her. A sweet throbbing, an excitement. His breath caressed her cheek. She wanted to wrap her arms around him. She wanted to press her body against him. She wanted...

"Mom! Dan! You two okay? Where are you?"

Jarod's voice broke the spell. Dan Marquette sprang to his feet and reached a hand down to Kelly. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet. Kelly felt herself flush.

"We're fine," Dan called out, exhaling raggedly. "We're fine. We're right here."

He looked at Kelly, caught her chin and spoke huskily. "Don't you

dare try to deny it! I simply won't let you."

And Kelly knew that her world would never, ever be the same again.

*

"THERE'S NO GAME tonight?" Kelly called over her shoulder to Jarod. She was perched on her stool, staring blankly at an equally blank piece of paper. Thank God she didn't have an imminent deadline.

Jarod came up behind her and kissed the top of her head. "Mom, I told you, the game is tomorrow night. I'm going over to Sandy's to watch television."

"Is her dad going to be there?"

"I don't know, Mom," Jarod said. "But Reeves will be."

The doorbell started to ring just as Kelly brought her pencil down to the paper. "Jarod! Get that, will you?"

But Jarod must have gone down to the basement. She slid off her stool and went to the door. Dan Marquette stepped in.

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Working." Kelly held up her pencil.

He took it out of her fingers. "I need some help. Want to go to dinner with me?"

Kelly swallowed. She did want to go to dinner. She was dying to leave the house, because she wasn't in any mood for work. And the way he looked, she would love to go anywhere with him.

"Hi, Dan!" Jarod had appeared in the hallway.

"Hi, Jarod."

"You're not at home," Jarod blurted.

Dan grinned. "No, I'm not. But Reeves is."

Jarod looked at the floor, blushing. "I know."

"I came to see if your mom wanted to go up to the Hilltop House for dinner."

Jarod looked at his mother, who refused to meet his eyes.

"I'd have to shower and change," she murmured.

Dan shrugged. "Whenever you're ready."

Kelly nodded vaguely and started up the stairs. Jarod watched her and stared at Dan.

"Yeah. Well, I'm, uh, on my way, I guess. Can I get you something while you're waiting? A beer? Scotch?"

"A beer would be nice."

When Jarod returned with it, Dan was still in the hallway. "Uh, why don't you have a seat in the parlor?" he suggested. "Mom won't be long. She's real quick. She's not a primp."

"Jarod..."

"Well, I guess I'll be going. Sandy is expecting me. Have a good time, huh?"

Dan nodded. "Thanks, I'm sure we will. You, too." He picked up a magazine and walked into the parlor with it.

But at that very moment there was a piercing scream—Kelly's—from upstairs.

Dan dropped both the magazine and his beer and bolted up the stairs.

KELLY HAD BEEN quick. She'd chosen a light blue silk dress—a halter-type garment, strapless, with a full skirt—and laid it out on the bed.

She'd pulled back the shower curtain to start the water and frowned, thinking that she must remember to open the bathroom window afterward. The tile was molding because she never remembered.

Kelly hesitated, then went ahead and opened it. Who could possibly look through her bathroom window? Her neighbors were hundreds of yards away through the trees.

She opened the window and started to hum. She was trying to forget about everything, in fact. Such as falling for the man who was going to be Jarod's father-in-law. The complications were endless.

No, she told herself. She wasn't falling for him....

Kelly sudsed herself and set her face beneath the spray. Don't think! she reminded herself. I wanted to kiss him, she admitted silently. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair, and...

She turned around, letting the water sluice through her hair, and as she opened her eyes, she screamed.

Someone was staring at her. Someone two flights up from street level, just beyond the bathroom window.

"Kelly!"

She couldn't breathe or gasp out a reply. She could only stand with the water sluicing over her. She wasn't a coward, she told herself. She was just short.

"Kelly!"

She dimly heard the bathroom door crash open; then the curtain was ripped back. And she was standing there in her birthday suit.

Dan Marquette was standing there, too. Tense, anxious, concerned, ready to do battle.

And the eyes were still there. Kelly pointed.

Marquette looked, just as Kelly threw herself against him. All of her. Dripping wet.

"Didn't you see them! Oh, my God, Dan! The eyes! Staring in!"

He was holding her. All of her. And she was perfect! Smooth, sleek, and quivering in his arms. Her flesh was softer than silk....

"Dan, there were eyes! Staring at me!"

"What? Eyes? Oh, yes. I—oh!"

He handed her a towel. "I'll go check."

"Dan, be careful! There's someone out there!"

She thought that he might be in danger. The danger was when he returned!

Kelly managed to wrap the towel around herself, but that was as far as she got. She stood there shivering, then steeled herself to go to the window, to look out. Someone was standing by the big oak.

"Dan?"

He looked up. "Kelly, I can't find anything. Whoever or whatever was here is gone now."

She nodded, and a moment later he was back in the steaming bathroom. She was still standing in the tub with nothing but a towel between them.

Kelly McGraw, you don't know this man very well, she warned herself. It's wrong.

"You—you couldn't find anything?" she managed.

He cleared his throat. "There are some broken branches. Someone or something did go up the tree."

His eyes never left her face, but his gaze was like a caress. He stood so still, so tall, filling the room. "Should I get you anything?" he asked. "A drink? Some brandy?" Me? he added silently. All of me. You'll never be afraid again. I won't let you—I swear it.

He should leave, of course. The danger was gone. Gone—or just beginning?

Water clung to her in delightful droplets. Her hair was drying in soft golden wisps. The towel wasn't really around her—just kind of against her breasts. She looked so tiny, delicate, exquisite....

He took a step toward her, and she didn't move, so he took another, then lifted her over the bathtub rim and against him. He felt the tremendous shivering that seized her body. She didn't look away from him. She tilted her head back, and her eyes met his. He could have sworn that his heart stopped.

"I promised your son we'd go to dinner," he said.

"We will," she told him.

He bent down and kissed her with all the yearning in his heart and soul. His tongue slid over her lips, grazing against her teeth, plunging and delving into her sweet hot depths.

The towel slid from between them. She was kissing him back now. Her tongue, a sweet torment, was deep in his mouth; her fingers were entwined in the hair at his nape. They merged together in that kiss, and the night stopped. Time ceased to be. When they finally pulled apart, nei-

ther of them could breathe, and neither of them cared. He saw only her beautiful eyes, blue and open and honest, searing into his own.

"Oh, Kelly," he whispered, and then he kissed her again. When he drew away this time, there was nothing that needed to be said. What was happening between them was so right that it couldn't be denied.

"Oh, Kelly," he whispered again, and he swept her naked body into his arms.

He barely knew the way, yet his footsteps led him surely to her bed. He laid her on it, but when he tried to draw away to undress, she parted her lips and smiled, and pulled him into a kiss again.

He kicked his shoes off, and when the kiss ended, he was above her. Their eyes remained locked as he removed his tie, as she eased away his jacket, and they fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and vest together.

Things went in every direction. His vest to the left, his shirt to the right, his belt to the foot of the bed.

Only then did her fingers falter. He stood and shed his trousers and briefs, then fell down beside her again. For a long moment they remained that way, feeling the marvel of their bodies meeting.

She made a little sound and moved against him, and suddenly the world was filled with brilliant color. He burned with desire. It raged within him as he swept his arms around her and felt the liquid motion of her body beneath his. Too fast, he warned himself. They had just met, and he couldn't let passion take control.

But it had.

A hoarse, guttural cry escaped him, and he shifted his weight over hers. He let his trembling hand roam free over her breast, then touched that seductive flesh with his kiss, with his tongue, holding her nipple within his mouth, warning himself to slow down, ignoring that warning as her body arched against him. ♡

Kelly decided that she had gone mad. But she deserved to be mad, she told herself. She was an adult.... And this was paradise! Once she had thought herself a decent lover. She had loved her husband, and life had been good.

But this was new. This was so intense it was painful. So delicious that denial would be akin to death. This was something that she had never known.

She whispered his name out loud, harshly, hoarsely. His teeth were grazing her nipple while his fingers stroked the soft inner flesh of her upper thigh, and she seemed to become liquid, hot and molten. She emitted a small sound, and then a louder one, and then a searing cry as his touch probed deep within her. The sensation electrified her, and she shuddered because it felt so good, so intense.

He told her to open her eyes, and she did. She stared at him with wonder, enchanted with the passion she could read on his face. He shifted again, smiling, entering her, and she cried out boldly. For a moment she was horrified at the sound, but he laughed with such triumph and pleasure that she buried her face against his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his back.

She savored each second, each movement, each slow, subtle thrust that brought him deeper and deeper into her, made him more and more a part of her.

Her blood seemed to sing in her ears, her entire body moved to the music, his touch. She flew, and she soared, and she sobbed, because she had to reach the pinnacle, yet he held her back again and again, so that she was forced to fly and soar again.

Finally she reached it: a moment so high, so wonderful, so good, that light had never been so explosive, color had never been so brilliant. She felt as if the stars were colliding inside her, yet she knew that she was completely of the earth. As she drifted downward she smiled, because once again she could hear her breath and his, hear her heartbeat and his. Feel her flesh, damp and slick, against his.

She smoothed the hair back from his forehead, ran her fingers over his cheek. He kissed her fingers.

"I think I'm in love," Kelly murmured.

Then she suffered a pang of remorse. What an asinine thing to say! Anyone with any sense knew that love and lovemaking weren't the same, that a man might run if such words were spoken too early.

But he didn't run. He grinned. And kissed her forehead.

"Kelly, do you have any idea how sweet, how fresh, how wonderful you are?"

She colored and curled against his chest, fingering the damp curls of dark hair there.

"Really?" she whispered.

He slipped his arms around her and held her close. "What do you think the kids are going to say?"

Kelly frowned, then sat up, laughed and straddled him. It was a wonderful feeling, natural and easy. "Actually," she told him, "I had no intention of telling them."

He nodded. "Well, they are going to realize that we're getting along much better."

"Are we?"

"I thought we got along just splendidly," he said, his dark eyes alive with sensual fire. "If you've forgotten already, I can refresh your memory."

"Mr. Marquette," she murmured primly, "when I woke up this morning, I most certainly did not intend to spend the evening in bed with you. But once we made the... connection... oh, that doesn't sound right, does it?"

Grinning, Dan said, "It sounds divine, Mrs. McGraw. Divine."

He leaned down to kiss her.

"Dinner," she murmured. "You're forgetting, dinner comes early around here! If we don't eat soon..."

Dan glanced at her clock and shrugged. "We can always drive over to Charleston. It's not that late." He smiled, lowering himself against her. "We've got plenty of time," he told her.

And she didn't protest.

TWENTY MINUTES later they were in the shower—with the window closed. But when Dan made an openly amorous move with the soap, she hopped out of his way, pointing at her watch.

"We really will miss dinner!" she told him. "I keep telling you, this isn't New York or D.C.!"

He laughed, remembering that he had wanted to go to the Hilltop House because they could walk after dinner and take in the beautiful view.

They managed to get into the dining room just in time, and get seats right next to the window, too. Friday night dinner was a buffet, and their waitress warned them to get their food quickly, before the chef began to put things away.

They didn't speak much until they had eaten, and then they both laughed again, because they had been so hungry. Kelly ordered a coffee liqueur and Dan a black Irish coffee when they had finished the meal. Only then did his fingers fall over hers, and she smiled a little awkwardly in return.

"You know," Dan said lightly, "Sandy is crazy about you. I'll never be able to thank you enough for that."

Kelly felt her cheeks flush, and wondered how on earth she could still blush so easily around him. "She's a beautiful girl, and you know it."

Dan agreed, then he frowned. "You know, they have to decide on a college they can both go to."

Kelly shrugged. "Jarod wanted Georgetown. He wants to be a politician eventually."

"Sandy wanted the University of Miami. Premed."

"Well, they're going to have to compromise. And they probably should—" Kelly began, but they

were interrupted by a sweet, feminine voice.

"Kelly McGraw! How good to see you, darling!"

Kelly swung around, feeling only the slightest dismay. The woman coming toward them was a very pretty natural redhead. Kelly had known her—though not always liked her—since high school. She was also sophisticated and elegant—and tall.

Dan was already politely on his feet. Kelly said, "Dan Marquette, June DeMarco. June, Dan Marq—"

"Marquette, yes, I know," June said serenely, pulling up a chair to join them, even before Dan could help her.

June grinned at Kelly. "Mr. Marquette is the talk of the town, Kelly. And you know each other?"

"Our children are engaged," Dan supplied.

June's eyebrows shot up. "Kelly! You didn't tell me!"

"June, honestly, I haven't had a chance," Kelly said, but June had already linked a long arm through Dan's and was telling him that she ran a simply wonderful antique shop down in the historic section. "You really must come by!"

"I'm sure I will," Dan said non-committally.

Kelly laughed. "Down, June! Dan, forgive her. She's only been divorced for two years, and we're still trying to teach her proper behavior."

"Oh, nuts to you, Kelly McGraw!" June teased. "We've been trying to teach Kelly that widowhood does not mean instant membership in the nunnery!"

Dan choked on his coffee. Kelly reddened and quickly asked June about her daughter.

They talked for a while about casual things; then June suddenly frowned and asked Dan, "Your daughter isn't home alone, is she?"

Dan shook his head. "No. Jarod is over there, for one. And Reeves—sort of a butler, sort of an old friend—who lives with us. Why?"

June stared at Kelly uneasily. "Haven't you heard? The police, the sheriff's office and even the FBI are after an escaped Tennessee convict. He's called the Peeper. He was convicted of thirteen assaults!"

Kelly gasped. "The Peeper!" she nearly shrieked.

"Calm down, Kelly, you don't know for sure. Kelly thought someone was watching her tonight," Dan said carefully.

"Thought!" Kelly exclaimed. "I saw those eyes!"

"Thank goodness Dan was with you," June purred.

"Yes, thank goodness," Dan murmured.

June said that Kelly should call the police anyway, and she did, from the inn. Dan spoke to them, too, and then they walked out to look at the view.

"You're not staying home alone," Dan said bluntly.

"But I won't be alone! I have a son, remember?"

"Kelly, the police made it sound as if this man is really dangerous. It might have been him, right outside. You are going to stay at my house."

"I can't! What—"

"You'll stay, and Jarod will stay."

"Oh, great! The kids will adore that!"

"Kelly! You can have your own room, and so can Jarod. My house is enormous. We'll tell the kids what happened—"

"We will not!" Kelly yelled.

"Not that!" Dan retorted. "We'll tell them about the Peeper, and the eyes staring in at you. That's all."

"I don't know, Dan," Kelly began.

"I do," he said, and she was still tempted to argue.

But she was a little bit frightened, too, so she didn't.

*

KELLY GNAWED lightly on her lower lip. Dan and Jarod and Reeves had been insistent that she not go home alone, not with the Peeper still on the loose. But she had work to finish. She could do preliminary drawings at Dan's, but she needed her board and her T-square and her pastels to do the final work.

Her work was a monthly project; *Dark of the Moon* was a comic book that came out twelve times a year, and she had just handed an issue in. But she was wasting an incredible amount of time. Dan didn't waste time. He had needed to research something on the flintlock pistol, so he had apologized profusely and taken off for Washington.

"I can't stay away from my house forever!" Kelly said out loud. She paused in front of the house. Jarod would be at school for at least another hour.

She hesitated, then decided not to park in the driveway. She went around to the empty Ipsom house

behind hers and parked underneath the oak.

Kelly was a little nervous when she let herself in: she hadn't been alone in the house since she had heard about the Peeper. But she reminded herself that, after all, she hadn't been hurt, just frightened. The Peeper—if that's who the eyes had belonged to—hadn't been inside.

She would be fine. She'd just work for a few hours, lock up, then go back to Dan's.

Images seemed to fly onto the paper. But it was her hand that flew. There was just nothing like love.

"And I *am* in love!" she whispered.

Only then did her hand pause. Was she really in love? Could love come that quickly? She wouldn't dare to tell Dan that she loved him. It was one thing to murmur in the afterglow of passion—yet suddenly she knew that she was willing to take chances. Even if it meant getting hurt. This would be an adult relationship. There wouldn't be any "have to's" this time. She wouldn't have to marry him. If and when things went further, she would know that it was what they both wanted. Kelly smiled. And then she froze.

Someone was at her front door.

She slid off her stool, determined to walk out and look through the peephole. But her front door was already opening.

Glancing quickly around the room, Kelly saw a heavy vase. She grabbed it, then looked for someplace to hide.

The footsteps were coming closer. Any minute now the intruder would be in the room with her.

Kelly made a mad dive for the doorway, then stood there.

The footsteps hesitated just outside the doorway, as if the intruder knew she was just feet away.

Another step.

He was there; one more step and she would have to strike.

A floorboard gave; the step was taken.

Kelly let out a loud cry, then rushed from behind the door with the vase raised. The intruder's head was way above her. The room was dim and shadowy—crash!

And—slam!

She was gripped violently by the shoulders, then slammed back hard against the wall.

"Kelly!"

"Oh!" she cried. Her panic faded as she stared with dismay at Dan holding his head between his palms and staring back.

"Dan! What are you doing here?"

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" he demanded.

"I live here!"

"But you're not supposed to be here!"

"Neither are you!"

"Ooh...damn!" he groaned, and felt his head gingerly. He headed for the kitchen and nervously, Kelly followed him. He was digging into the freezer for ice. She got a towel to hold it for him. Still staring at her furiously, he slid into a chair at the kitchen table.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "You're not supposed to be in town. How did you get in?"

"I have Jarod's key. They're coming to put in a security system, and I had to be here. And I didn't tell

you because I was pretty sure you wouldn't have let me do it."

"I wouldn't have... I won't," she protested, as his mouth came down on top of hers. Possessed it, owned it, ravaged it—and it was wonderful.

They broke apart, and she slipped her arms around his neck, then pressed her face to his shoulder. His hand went to her throat and then her breast, and she thought of all the times when she had wanted so desperately to be with him, when they hadn't touched each other, hadn't dared, because Sandy and Jarod were with them.

"Dan," Kelly said at last. "Dan, I can't let you do this. I don't know what a good security system costs, but I can't afford it right now, and I can't let you—"

She broke off, because his expression was dark and furious. "Dan?"

He stood up slowly. "Kelly, I can't take it anymore. Can you? Hell, I didn't have to leave town! I just couldn't bear you being in a bed in my house without me in that bed, too!"

"But... but..."

"Kelly, you can let me put this system in so that you and Jarod can come home, or we can say, 'the hell with whatever the kids think,' and you can move into my bedroom. I can't stand this any longer. We're adults, but we're trying to act chaste because that's the way we want our kids to behave. But it's too late. And I'm not going to do it any longer!"

Kelly inhaled slowly and shakily. He was making her furious, and she didn't like his set of choices!

"You'll be able to come home Friday or Saturday," Dan said harshly.

She felt all the tension—sexual, wonderful, frightening—in the man before her. She wanted to give herself to him completely. But not quite yet.

ON SATURDAY afternoon they all went to Jarod's game; it was an all-star game, with the income from ticket sales going to a local charity.

Jarod, Kelly noted, shone. He outdid even himself that day. He couldn't miss. If he passed, the ball was caught. If he ran, he gained yard after yard.

"He could probably go pro," Dan said.

I don't want him to go pro, Kelly thought, but she didn't say it; it wasn't her decision. Jarod wanted to go into law and politics, and Kelly personally thought that such a life had to be better than one spent having knees put back together.

She shrugged. "He'll have to decide when the time is right."

Dan laughed softly. "So if luck goes your way, he won't play pro ball, huh?"

"Dan, that's not—"

His laughter, warm and husky, caught her up.

"Oh, go buy some peanuts, will you!" she snapped.

"Peanuts aren't going to solve our problems, Kelly."

"Dan, I can't talk about this in the middle of the game!"

"You have to. Because later the kids will be back, and I know you—you won't want to talk in front of them."

"Dan!" she whispered suddenly, vehemently. "You know I want to be with you!"

"You will be." He paused, then went to buy a sack of the hot roasted nuts.

Someone hailed him when he started back up the stadium steps. It was Sandy, Kelly saw. She looked a little tense. She was smiling, but she was tense.

Because a lot of girls were watching Jarod, watching him like tiggresses on the hunt.

He won't hurt you, Sandy! Kelly wanted to promise her. He'll smile, because he's Jarod. He'll be flattered, and he'll be polite. But he really loves you, and he would never hurt you. I hope you know that!

The clock ticked down, and the game was over. The rest of the players on the winning team lifted Jarod up like a god, while the crowd screamed and people began to rise from the stands.

Kelly stood hastily, feeling uneasy, although she wasn't sure why. Then Sandy was with them, asking if she and Jarod could do something that night, all in one breath.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Dan commanded.

"Everyone is going, Dad! I mean everyone—" she insisted.

"Jarod isn't," Kelly interrupted. "Because he hasn't said a word to me yet."

"Oh!" Sandy spun around. "Oh, Kelly, he will! He just has a hard time getting away from the other kids." She paused. Her words had held a touch of bitterness. But her enthusiasm washed it away. "Dad,

Kelly, really, it's totally innocent, and it sounds wonderful!"

"Totally innocent," Dan repeated, grinning. "What are you talking about, Sandra?"

"Well, Coach Harrison said he wants to take the team up to Skyline Drive for the night. There's a special nature hike first thing in the morning. Coach said that he'd take the first string and—"

"Since when are you first string?" Dan demanded.

Sandy blushed. "Da-aad!" she wailed. "It's not just Coach Harrison going! It's his wife, and two other teachers and their wives, and six other girls. Separate cabins—and Mrs. Harrison will be in with us."

Dan glanced over at Kelly. She smiled, knowing that he was trusting to her greater knowledge of the situation. "I think it'll be okay," she said slowly.

Sandy threw her arms around her and nearly suffocated her with gratitude. "Oh, Kelly! Thank you! I'll go tell Jarod."

She went rushing away. Kelly and Dan stared at each other, laughed, then shrugged.

"Hmm. I say dinner on the highway," said Dan. "That new place that just opened. I hear it's wonderfully romantic. Italian food, great wine, and a strolling violin player. Then we can catch the last ghost tour, and then..." He winked.

Kelly moved closer to him, taking both his hands, holding them between hers.

"Dan, I own a cabin up in the mountains. It's the most beautiful place in the world. There's a stream and a fireplace, and deer that eat

right out of your hand. It's so peaceful. The tour ends at ten—"

"You've got a date, Mrs. McGraw. Shall we collect our offspring and hurry them on their way?"

"Sounds good to me!"

WHEN THEY reached the driveway Jarod reached into the trunk to bring out his gear, then stopped cold to look at Kelly.

"Mom, they haven't caught this Peeper guy, have they?"

"Not that I know of."

His shoulders seemed to sag. "I can't—I mean, this overnight thing isn't that big a deal."

Kelly inhaled sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"You! Oh, Mom! I can't leave you here alone!"

"There's a brand-new security system in this house!"

"But you would still be alone! Mother," Jarod went on primly, "you must know that for a parent you are...very nice-looking." He grinned. "I've actually gotten into a few fights 'cause of you. That sickie would think he'd died and gone to heaven if he found you alone."

Kelly blinked, and nodded slowly. "Thank you for the compliment—I think. But, Jarod, I'm going to the new Italian restaurant with Dan and—"

"Oh! You can go back over there for tonight! And I won't have to worry, because Reeves will be there!"

"I could, uh, stay with Dan, yes."

He smiled, relieved, then started for the house.

Kelly waited behind him guiltily for a moment. Then she shrugged

and followed him. She hadn't lied to him; he had simply made some assumptions. Why should she correct him?

By the time she reached the front door, he was upstairs in the shower. By the time she had her sneakers untied, he was out, clad in his briefs, drying his hair. "I'm going to get dressed. When is Dan supposed to be here?" he asked.

"Soon, I guess."

"I'll stay until he gets here. Go on, take your shower. I'll be downstairs. And if you see anything, scream your head off. I may not be old, but I'm tough."

Kelly laughed, brushing his cheek with her knuckles. "I know you're tough, hotshot. And, hey, I was proud of you today," she added softly.

He grinned. "I know, Mom. Thanks." He gave her a quick hug, then turned back to his own room.

A little nervously, Kelly threw off her dirty clothes and stepped beneath the shower. She was glad that Jarod had decided to wait with her. She started smiling, thinking of Dan. They would have all night together. Up at her cabin...

She paused, remembering Jarod's admission that Sandy had gotten pregnant at the cabin. And, of course, Jarod had come into existence there.

But it still meant everything good to her. The cabin had been David's, and it represented everything good about him, too.

"I loved you," she whispered aloud. "I really loved you, David McGraw."

But he was gone, and he'd been gone a long time. They have lived together long enough to know that love was not a fantasy, that it was real. Could be real again.

And then she realized that she was standing in the shower, not moving. She turned off the faucet. David wouldn't begrudge any of them the cabin. He would secretly have laughed if he'd known about Jarod and Sandy....

Just as he had always smiled when the cabin and Jarod's name were mentioned together.

He would smile now. He could be jealous, he could be possessive—but he would like Dan Marquette. Kelly felt it with certainty, and that made her feel very, very good about herself. And about the evening ahead.

JAROD LET Dan in when he came to the front door. They talked about the game for a moment, then, to Dan's surprise, Jarod let out a great sigh of relief. "I'm so glad my mother is spending the night with you!"

"Ah—what?" Dan asked.

"With this Peeper guy running around."

"Oh, yes."

Jarod grinned. "Old Reeves can hear a pin drop, you know. I leaned over to give Sandy a kiss on the cheek when we were watching TV, and the next thing I knew, he was standing between us."

Dan nodded, grateful when Jarod kept talking.

"Thanks for letting us go on this trip. And you have a good time. Well, don't have *too* good a time."

"Goodbye, Jarod. And be careful." Dan heard him run up the stairs

to say goodbye to his mother, then rush back down and out the front door.

Kelly came downstairs a few minutes later. She looked beautiful in an emerald-green knit dress with a mandarin collar and long sleeves. He didn't realize he was staring until she smiled a bit nervously and hurried over, rising on tiptoe to kiss him.

"Well?"

He laughed ruefully. "Lust is roaring through me," he told her. More than lust, Kelly, he added silently. Drawing a ragged breath, he set his hands on her shoulders and smiled ruefully.

"We'd better get going. I made reservations."

She nodded, then said, "Oh! Wait!" and fetched a massive suitcase.

"For one night?"

"Ah, but you don't know what's in it."

He took the suitcase from her and marveled at its weight. "Hot bricks?" he asked.

"Never you mind, Mr. Marquette."

When they reached the restaurant he ordered champagne and made a toast to her beautiful blue eyes. She laughed, but then he made another toast, taking her hand across the table. "Kelly, thank you. Thank you for inviting me someplace that is really special to you."

She moved her fingers idly over his hand, and when she looked back up at him, he knew he was staring at her too intently. But he loved her so much that he wanted to learn everything there was to know about her.

"Hey!" she protested. "People are looking at us." She smiled playfully trying to break the mood.

"I think it's because you're beautiful."

She grinned again. "I think it's because *we're* beautiful—together. Dan, thank you. I feel young and beautiful with you."

He sipped his champagne. "You are young."

"Not that young. Just short."

"You're not that short. But come on, Kelly, tell me. How young?"

"Well, I'm not underage."

"Thirty-four to thirty-six?"

"Thirty-six in October."

He whistled softly. "Aha!"

"Aha, what?" She stared at him, then flushed. "Well, it was never any massive secret. I made it through my senior year on a real wing and a prayer. David and I were married in June, and Jarod was born in August." She stared at him suddenly, defiantly. "Just like Sandy and Jarod. And that's why I know how hard it's going to be for them."

Dan leaned toward her. He took both her hands in his. "Kelly, you stayed married, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Kelly, people should never get married because of a child. There are options. More today than you had. If Sandy had become pregnant by the man in the moon and wanted to keep the baby, I would have stood beside her all the way, whether the boy did or not. But Jarod loves her. And she loves him. It's going to be tough, but love will keep them together. Your life might have been hard, but, Kelly, you two beat the

odds. I think Sandy and Jarod will make it, too."

She smiled wistfully at him. "Think so?"

He kissed both palms of her hands. "I know so. And guess what? I think their parents are going to make it, too."

*

THERE WERE at least fifty people on the ghost tour that night. It was something Kelly had done a dozen times, but she loved it. It was really called "Harpers Ferry Myths and Legends," and the proprietress was a marvelous storyteller who didn't swear that ghosts existed, merely pointed out certain unusual occurrences in the city.

When the tour was over and people began to disperse, they stood holding hands, gazing at each other.

"You liked it?"

"It was wonderful. I love this place. It's nice at night. It's as if the entire world belongs to us, and only us, right now."

When they came to Dan's car, Kelly gave him directions through the park to the highway and over the border. They actually drove through three states, but it took barely fifteen minutes, and in another five they were halfway up the mountain, parking beside the stream.

Kelly scampered out of the car, up the walk and into the cabin, hoping Jarod had kept the place clean.

He had.

It was just a rough-hewn, one-room cabin, the only addition being the bathroom. The fireplace took up almost an entire wall, and Jarod had

stacked plenty of wood. The spring night was just cool enough for a fire.

Dan came in with Kelly's suitcase. He gazed around at the comfortable sofa and chairs, the Indian rug in front of the fireplace, the warm orange and brown curtains.

"It's wonderful," he told her, touching her mouth with his. "It's the warmest place I've ever been."

She smiled and stepped past him quickly to heave the suitcase up on the counter. It contained a stick of pepperoni, several cheeses, crackers and a vintage red wine.

"Dynamite." Dan laughed. "I'll make the fire if you'll cut the pepperoni and pour the wine."

She nodded, but then he pulled her against him, and all she could see was the dark fire in his eyes. She gazed at him with something like wonder. This was real life turning into magic. His touch could make her tremble, melt, yearn to join him in love.

She stared at him, touched his cheek softly.

"I won't be able to make the fire."

"I think you've already made it," she murmured.

He didn't reply. She saw a shadow fall over his face, something that sent a thrill racing up her spine. She felt his hands on the zipper of her dress, felt the fabric slide down against her flesh. When the dress had fallen to the floor, she carelessly kicked it away.

She wondered at his intentions for a moment when he lowered himself to his knees, and then realized he had knelt to remove her shoes. She braced herself against his shoulders; then her fingers tightened, as his

hands slid along her thighs to the top of her stockings. She caught her breath and cast her head back, dazed by the rising sensations inside her.

He remained kneeling before her, and she realized that she had never known what it was to feel so adored. At first she felt strong and pleased at her power over his desires, then incredibly weak, then he touched her so deeply with his caress.

He stroked her with a heat and tenderness that filled her until she had no will of her own. He swept her again and again to the brink, eased her down, swept her up and up and . . . over.

Panting, gasping, she stared down in amazement, slightly embarrassed. He had been so . . . intimate, and she was already quivering, drenched. . . .

"You—you shouldn't—" she gasped.

"Why not?"

"Well, I—I—"

He stood and swept her into his arms, then carried her to one of the chairs and set her there. Again she felt tremors, ripples, a quivering inside. She heard the rasp of a zipper and, oh, what a sound could do. . . .

She felt it all over again. The warmth, the soaring, the rhythm that went on and on, the throbbing need for him.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder, damp, gasping, savoring his body against her, inside her. He filled her with a staggering pleasure, hot and alive and full. She kneaded his shoulders and back, and felt the fabric of his shirt. Deliriously, she wanted to rip it to shreds. Instead she unbuttoned it slowly, shuddered and

touched the bare flesh of his chest, then gripped his shoulders and stared into his eyes.

They were dark with hunger, his features taut, straining, almost grim. His eyes closed, and he moved within her, one final thrust, exquisite in the volatile pleasure it gave them both....

They clung together for a moment, panting. Then he raised his head, his eyes alight with amusement, and she flushed.

"I thought you said you shouldn't?" he teased her.

"Well, I didn't think...." she began primly, but lowered her lashes at the sound of his laughter.

"Don't worry, okay?" he murmured, then picked her up again and collapsed into the chair with her on his lap. He kissed her lightly and she began to feel a different warmth, the kind she had felt in town, when the tour had ended and the darkness closed around them like a blessing. I love you, she thought again with awe. It wasn't the lovemaking—although that was so wonderful she still couldn't believe it. It was the warmth, the pleasure she felt just in holding his hand, in listening to him talk, in watching the stars reflected in his eyes.

"I—I have to get dressed," she murmured. "I'm supposed to be cutting pepperoni."

"The pepperoni will taste a million times better if you cut it...undressed."

Kelly laughed. "You're terrible! And you're still dressed. Well, sort of..."

"I'll strip," he swore solemnly. "Right now." He slid his loafers off

while she was still on his lap. Then, holding her tightly, he shed his shirt with a speed that left her gasping.

Then he stood abruptly, deposited her on her feet and bent over to shimmy out of his jeans.

She turned and raced for the shower, shivered beneath the cold water, and hopped out quickly. Then she grabbed a towel and wrapped herself up in it.

When she walked back out Dan was naked, comfortably hunched down while he set the logs and started the fire. He sat back, whistling a tune, smiling complacently, and merely arching a brow while she strutted by defiantly in her towel.

"No fair," he charged. But then he shrugged and sat on the rug, edging back to lean against the sofa. Kelly poured out two glasses of wine. She dug around under the sink for a cutting board and started on the cheese, then the pepperoni.

Dan went to the closet and procured an armful of pillows and her feather comforter to create a marvelous little nest in front of the fire.

Kelly ate some pepperoni, then sipped her wine. As she leaned over to set the glass down, she studied Dan. She loved him so much. Everything about him. His dark hair, the slant of his nose, the little lines beside his eyes, the deep tan that bronzed his whole body—except for the whiteness of his rump!

Other women had probably loved him just as much before her, she reflected.

"Out with it," he said.

She shrugged. "I was just thinking about you. According to the kids, I should be wary."

"Why?"

"Well, they say you've 'loved 'em and left 'em.'"

"Oh? And how well do they know me?"

"I should think Sandy knows you quite well."

"Great. The little minx has been gossiping."

"Well..." Kelly lightly tapped his chest. "I did hear that you... had been around. And now, seeing you in action, well, you *are* something of an expert."

"I try."

Kelly flushed. "That's not what I meant." She picked up her wine. Suddenly she didn't like the way he was watching her; it made her uncomfortable about the way she was feeling. She was falling in love with him, but he... Who knew what—if anything—he felt for her.

"Kelly," he said softly, "I think Sandy would have liked me to have been serious a few times. She's been good to almost everyone I've ever dated. I just never fell in love before. Sandy thinks I'm hung up because of her mother. I'm not. I even understand—a little bit. It never bothered me that she left me—it killed me that she left Sandy. But she wanted something else out of life. I was drafted, and she was alone."

Love... *I just never fell in love before...*

That was what he'd said.

They were the most beautiful words she had ever heard, and they made her laugh with delight. Laugh and laugh until he took the glass from her, stretched her out, and she felt his kisses, burning, sweet and hot, against her shoulder, her

mouth, her collarbone. Her breasts and her ribs and her waist and...

They made love.

Again and again... Before the fire, the blaze casting gilded patterns against their skin. It was a night of discovery. As long as she lived, Kelly would remember kneeling while he knelt, touching his shoulders, drawing her fingers across his skin, then leaning over and pressing her lips along the same path.

In the end Kelly had no desire to make up the bed. She was too comfortable there before the fire and she began to doze after the perfection of their lovemaking.

Dan nudged her.

"I can't," she groaned. "I really can't."

He laughed. "I was going to ask if you have another blanket. Then you can keep your cute little tush on the comforter and I can put something else over us."

"There's a whole pile of blankets in the closet."

She was so tired she could barely speak, but she felt him stand, heard him pad over to the closet.

She must have dozed then, if only for a few seconds. She came awake and realized that he was standing there, silent, still, his expression like a thundercloud. He was holding something. "Dan?"

Then he was shaking something white and lacy in front of her.

Sandy's bra, Kelly realized. Damn them! They hadn't only got Sandy pregnant—they'd left half their clothing behind.

"Do you know what this is?" Dan demanded.

"A bra," she said dully.

"No, not a bra!" he stormed at her. "Sandy's bra! This whole thing was your fault!"

"My fault!" Kelly shrieked. "What do you think—that I dragged Sandy up here? That I sent her an invitation?"

She found her panties and stumbled into them, then her slip.

"Jarod sure as hell invited her up!"

"She could have said no!"

Fumbling, Kelly managed to shimmy into the rest of her clothing. Dan must really have been floored by his discovery of the "scene of the crime." Apparently he hadn't even noticed that she was dressing.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Leaving!" Kelly retorted.

"In the middle of the night?"

"You guessed it, Sherlock."

"Oh, no, you're not!"

"Oh, yes, I am!"

She had slammed her way out the front door before he could stop her. Kelly smiled grimly, wishing she'd taken his keys—but willing to walk down the mountain. She knew it like the back of her hand, and she had a good head start. He couldn't come rushing out stark naked.

But as soon as she was on the path to the stream and the trail that went on down to the highway, an uneasy sensation stirred at the base of her spine. She heard a rustling in the bushes.

It's a deer, she told herself.

But it wasn't an animal. Not the four-footed variety, anyway. She knew it. There was someone evil behind her. Someone who meant to

slink through the darkness and assault her.

She inhaled, desperate to scream. But who would hear her? Would Dan? How far had she come?

She turned; she could keep her back to the danger no longer. And she saw them. Those eyes. Those same horrible eyes that had stared at her before. Eyes filled with pure menace...

There was enough light for her to see that they belonged to a man. Reaching for her in the darkness.

She screamed at last, loud and long. Then, when he was just about to touch her, he fell instead.

Something was on top of him. Something bronze, except for a little patch of white. On the rump.

Dan.

Of all the deplorable—absolutely fantastic!—gall.

He hadn't bothered with his jeans, or even his briefs! Now he was embroiled in a horrible fight.

She screamed again. "Oh, God!"

"Kelly!"

"Dan! That must be him! The Peeper! And, Dan! It was him! The other night, staring at me..."

He was there, her naked savior, taking her into his arms. Trembling, shaking, she fell into them.

"Shh, Kelly, it's all right. He's unconscious. We've got to call the police."

She nodded, trembling, and they went back to the cabin together, Dan dragging their captive along.

THE GOOD NEWS was that they had caught the Peeper.

The bad news was that the story was plastered over the front pages of newspapers as far away as D.C. and Knoxville.

Thank God Dan had gotten into his jeans before the police had come!

Still, the papers reported that she and Dan had been in the cabin on the mountain. The police had been called at 3:48 a.m. and had arrived to find the Peeper still unconscious.

It would have been impossible to tell Jarod that they had driven to the cabin to feed the deer.

He and Sandy came back around eleven to find Kelly, Dan and Reeves sipping coffee in Dan's living room. Jarod had burst in like a small tornado, with Sandy in his wake, waving a newspaper.

"Mom!"

He raced over to give her one of his massive hugs, the kind that she was afraid would break her one day.

Sandy gave her a much gentler hug. "I would have been just terrified. Thank God they caught that awful man and locked him up again. I'm so glad you and Dad were together...." Then she kissed and hugged her father, telling him he was a hero.

Jarod had moved to the window, hands clasped behind him. He turned to Kelly with a curious smile. "What were you doing out on that path at three in the morning, Mom?"

Kelly hardened her features and her heart and stared at him coolly. "Walking, Jarod."

"So you two were up at the cabin together, huh?"

"Yes, Jarod—" Kelly began, but Dan was on his feet.

"And do you really want to know what your mother was doing on that path, Jarod?" he said easily.

"Yes, I do!" he announced defiantly.

"Jarod!" Sandy said in alarm, trying to calm him down.

Even Dan said, "Stay out of this, Sandy."

"Now, wait a minute—" Kelly began.

"You, too, Mom!" Jarod snapped.

"I'll tell you what she was doing on the path!" Dan seemed to roar. "She was walking out on me. We were arguing, Jarod. It's funny. The truth had just slapped me in the face. There I was, picking up pieces of my daughter's underwear, and something just made me snap. I knew what you two had done, but I hadn't known where you had done it, and suddenly I was forced to stare it all in the face. So I blamed your mother, Jarod. It wasn't fair, but I wasn't being rational. And she was furious, so she walked out on me. I tried to catch her, to apologize. That's the full explanation, Jarod. But do you know what, son? I think that if you have any sense at all, you won't mention that cabin to me again. Or ask either one of us what we were doing in it."

Jarod stared at him for a long time, fists clenching and unclenching. Suddenly he turned to Kelly. "Mother, I'm leaving. Are you coming?"

"Jarod, I think—"

"I think you're acting like a spoiled brat and that you'd better watch your step with me, young man," Dan warned.

"Watch my step!" Jarod growled. "We've been through this before. I love Sandy. There's a big difference."

"Jarod, really!" Kelly snapped. "I'm your mother! I've raised you, and I have the right—"

"It has nothing to do with rights, Mother. It has to do with him. Don't you see? It's humiliating. He only wants—it's just like being his whore."

There was a deathly silence. Kelly was too amazed to talk; Sandy—and Dan—seemed to be in shock.

Jarod turned and stormed out of the house, slamming the door in his wake.

"I'm going to kill him!" Dan swore suddenly. "Take him apart limb by obnoxious limb—"

"Dad, no!" Sandy cried. "Dad, he really doesn't mean anything." She ran to him, clutching his arm. "Dad, please! Let me talk to him. He's upset. He'll apologize!"

She tried to smile at them both, her face ashen. "Please!" she whispered.

Kelly still couldn't move. She felt frozen. She could only watch as Sandy went racing out after Jarod.

Through the huge window, Kelly and Dan could see them clearly; Sandy trying to soothe him; Jarod shaking off her desperate grip on his shoulder.

Then Dan was suddenly in motion. He started toward the door, but Kelly raced after him.

"Dan!"

"I won't have her out there like that! Whining and pleading with that obnoxious, overgrown brat!"

"Dan, damn you, she's going to marry him! She's carrying his child, and he's my son! *My son!*"

"And you didn't do a damn thing to shut him up!"

Kelly jerked away from him as if he had burned her. "That's right, Marquette, I didn't. Like I said, he's my son. Even if he is an obnoxious brat, he's being protective. And if you so much as go near him, I'll never speak to you again."

"Kelly? You're defending his behavior!"

"Damn right," she said, picked up her purse, and marched toward the door.

Outside, she went sailing by Jarod and Sandy, but a second later he had caught up with her. He opened the passenger door for her, then moved to the driver's seat.

They drove home in an awful and absolute silence.

"Mom..." Jarod began once he had parked the car.

But Kelly had nothing to say to him. She slammed the car door and started for the house.

He followed. "Mother! Don't you see?"

Still silent, Kelly unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

Jarod was right on her tail. "The cabin, Mom!" he exclaimed in sudden fury. "How could you? How could you go up there with that man and sell out?"

Kelly slapped him. Hard. And then, even as he clutched his cheek in astonishment, she backed him up against the staircase. "I own that

cabin, Jarod—you don't! And without my knowing a damn thing about it, you brought that man's daughter up there. And she's pregnant. And we went out of our way to try to smooth the way for you. We're both trying to see things rationally, and we're both willing to help—and you repay me like this? Jarod..."

There were tears in his eyes. Real tears. "It was my father's cabin!" he shouted back. "It was all right for me to be there! It wasn't all right for you! You betrayed him. I was conceived there! It was my father's place!"

Kelly stopped short. "Jarod, I haven't betrayed your father! Your father is dead."

Jarod suddenly sank down on the bottom step. "It was Dad's cabin," he repeated softly.

Kelly sank down beside him, slipping an arm around his broad shoulders. "Jarod, I loved your father. A lot of things were very hard, and we made it anyway. But, Jarod, he's gone. I miss him, you miss him, but I've been alone a long, long time! Now, I don't have anything else to say on the matter, and quite frankly, Jarod, I really don't want to talk to you right now! Excuse me, please!"

She went up to her room, closed the door, then locked it.

She sat down on her bed and lifted her hands helplessly, then started to cry. She hated them. Both of them! How dare Jarod call her names? How dare he think that he could dictate to her?

And Dan! What was the matter with him? Couldn't he understand that Jarod would be upset? Couldn't

he have a little patience, a little empathy? Sandy didn't remember her mother. Jarod *did* remember his father. And he was a sensitive young man; maybe something about the cabin really was sacred to him.

She stopped crying and lay back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Damn Dan! Except that she loved Dan, too. Jarod didn't know that, and she was afraid to tell him. She had been coming to trust Dan, to believe in him, to believe that he loved her, too.

And now...

Maybe he would call her. Maybe he would apologize. He couldn't disappear. They would have to see each other again, because of the kids. Jarod and Sandy were still going to get married.

Kelly sighed. She was exhausted. She'd barely had an hour's sleep, and her crying jag had exhausted her further. She sighed again and fell asleep.

DAN WALKED out into the backyard, where the air was cool and the trees offered some shade, a place where he could try to curb the awful heat of his temper. He walked, because walking would burn steam.

I love you, Kelly McGraw, he thought, chewing a piece of grass. I love you, and I want you, and I'm...

"I'm sorry!" he swore aloud. But as much as he wanted her, he'd be damned if he was going to call her and apologize and tell her, sure, let her son run around acting as if their being together was something dirty and illicit. If Jarod had been anyone

else and he had called Kelly a whore, Dan would have decked him.

But he *was* her son....

I miss you! he thought again.

She'll call me! he promised himself. She *would* call, because she was wrong. She had to call.

BUT KELLY didn't call. She didn't call on Sunday, and she didn't call on Monday. Or Tuesday.

On Wednesday Dan discovered that Sandy had taken his side. She hadn't said a word to Jarod since he had walked away on Sunday.

She wouldn't really talk to Dan about it, but when he asked her if she had seen Kelly, she said no, certainly not, that she hadn't even spoken to Jarod.

"Sandy," he had reminded her softly, "you and Jarod have to straighten this out. Not talking doesn't seem to be the answer. Maybe I should—"

"No!" Sandy interjected fiercely. "No, Dad! Jarod has to grow up! I will not let our situation influence yours again!"

She was gone before Dan could say more.

He spent Thursday and Friday working, then discovered on Saturday that he hadn't really accomplished anything.

The weekend passed. Sandy moped around the house, and so did he. Reeves kept walking around pretending that nothing was wrong, but Dan could tell that even he was upset.

Dan talked to Sandy again. He reminded her that she and Jarod were planning a future—the rest of their lives—together. That whether he and

Jarod were best friends or not really didn't matter, but that whether the two of them got along did.

Dan decided—in silence—that if Jarod didn't come around to see him by the next weekend, he would go find the boy. But on Wednesday night, everything changed.

Sandy came home nearly hysterical. In the end Dan discovered that it was all because Jarod had been talking to a redheaded cheerleader. To his credit, Dan stayed fairly calm. He was convinced that Jarod had tried to make Sandy jealous because she had been giving him the silent treatment.

He calmed her down, then decided that this was the time to find Jarod himself. But when he picked up the phone to call the McGraw house, he stopped. Sandy was already on the line—to Jarod. She could clearly handle this one herself.

A few minutes later he heard her hang up. A second after that, the phone rang. Dan picked it up.

"Dan, Mr. Marquette! You can't let her do it! Please, sir, you can't."

"Who is this?" Dan asked, smiling.

"Me. Jarod. Sandy is mad at me over some little thing—"

"Jarod, this is not 'some little thing.' Son—"

"I'm sorry!" Jarod exclaimed. "Oh, God, I'm sorry! Sir, I know I offended you, but you've proved my point. You really don't care anything about my mother—"

"We're getting off the real subject here, Jarod, but a son who lives with his mother does not refer to her as a whore. And that goes for

whether you want to consider me Mr. Right or not—”

“Please, I’m sorry! Please—”

“I think you owe your mother the apology.”

There was silence for a minute.

“Yes, sir,” he said very softly. “I know I owe you both an apology. But Dan—Mr. Marquette—sir! Sandy is thinking of giving up the baby. She can’t do that! That baby is mine, too. She has no right—”

“Maybe she doesn’t. Decisions regarding the baby should be made by the two of you.” He hesitated. “On this, Jarod, I do agree with you.”

“Mr. Marquette, she says she’s going to go take care of the paperwork right now. Please, don’t let her leave the house. Not until I get there.”

“I’ll try.”

Dan hung up the phone, smiling. Sandy came out of her room and smiled back at him.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s on his way over here, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

She threw her arms around him. “I love you, Dad!”

“And you love Jarod, too, huh, baby?”

She nodded, beautiful eyes wide.

“As mad as I’ve been at Jarod, Sandy, I believe with all my heart that he loves you.”

She nodded. Then she smiled. “And you love her, don’t you? Kelly. You love Kelly.”

“Yeah. I think I do, babe. I think I do.”

SHE HAD BEEN standing by the fence watching him for a long time. Watching everything about him. His hands on the ball. His smile. His hair, catching in the breeze. His eyes, when he glanced her way.

Kelly had come to watch him quite specifically. Of course, she couldn’t have missed him. He was six-foot-three—a standout in any crowd. Striking, handsome—young, she thought. He was absolutely beautiful.

Yet none of those superficial things was what had drawn her. Not from the beginning, and not now. It had been his smile, and his passion, and all the things inside him. Oh, he was far from perfect. He was temperamental, with his ego and his stubborn streak and his impatience. But he was always able to see his mistakes, and he was always quick to apologize. She knew that always, through thick and thin, they could talk, and he would always be there for her.

It had begun the first time she saw him: love at first sight. And that love had deepened and grown with every step they took together.

Now he looked her way, and she smiled.

He stood still, tossing the football up in the air, then catching it. At last he came toward her.

He stood by the fence, and they were just inches apart. She was in love. Head over heels in love. She felt as if she would never love again as she did now.

“Hi,” she said. “Want to go for a ride?”

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"I love you..." His voice trailed away, his heart catching at the sight of her smile. "You're the most beautiful creature ever to walk this earth."

She laughed, a husky sound that caught in her throat. Warmth raced through her.

"You're a liar. I look like a blimp! But I... oh, I love you. I love you, and I need you, and I want you..."

It wasn't meant to seduce; it wasn't even meant to be sexy. They were honest words, meant for a lifetime.

The breeze picked up, and he walked through the gate to stand in front of her. A slow smile lit his face, and he raised his hand, palm flat, toward her. She put her own hand against his, and their fingers entwined.

"Do you have your car?" he asked her.

"Yes. Where do you want to go?"

"I know this wonderful place. It's a cabin, up in the hills."

She laughed, and they walked toward the car. In no time at all, it seemed, they were at the cabin.

While it was still light they wandered down to the stream, where they wound up laughing and showering each other with the cold mountain water. Naturally he built a fire as soon as they went back inside.

As they sat beside it, he touched her cheek, and in the gentle firelight they gazed into each other's eyes. Finally their clothes were shed.

He'd never seen anyone more beautiful. She had wonderful hair,

and it seemed to be a part of the fire, cascading over her breasts, glowing against the ivory of her flesh. Her breasts were beautiful and perfect and full, and when he looked at her, he could barely speak. Yet when she was in his arms he did, telling her how much he loved her. Each time he touched her body he murmured of her beauty, and she laughed, but he told her it was true: she was more beautiful than ever.

Finally their laughter faded. Love led the way for her, a gentle, tender path to ecstasy, sweet and torrid.

She belonged to him, with all her heart.

No one had ever loved so well. And no one had ever made love as they did. So deeply, so completely. Heart and body and soul...

She lay with her cheek against his chest, his fingers wound into her hair, and together they watched the flames playing softly in the hearth.

"Sometimes I still can't believe it," she murmured.

"Believe what?"

"How happy we are. From such a beginning! All of us, really."

He held her face tenderly between his hands and looked at her with a rueful grin. "Sometimes, just sometimes, life can be a little like a fantasy. We've found that magic. At least, I have. It's in your eyes."

"Oh, that's so nice."

He grinned again. "Yes, I thought so. Rather good for a grim old historian, don't you think?"

"Humph!" She would have said more, but the phone started ringing. They looked at each other with surprise, because no one should have known where they were.

Jarod. Of course! Jarod had seen them leave, and he must have guessed where they were going. Except that he wouldn't have interrupted them—unless...

"Sandy!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

Dan won the race to the phone, but he held the receiver away from his ear so they both could hear.

"Jarod?"

"It's a boy!"

"A boy! It's a boy!" Dan repeated for Kelly.

"Eight pounds, two ounces."

"Congratulations! We'll be right there."

"Good." Jarod hesitated just a second. "Put your clothes on first, will you, please?"

Kelly grabbed the phone. "I heard that, young man!"

"Sorry! Get here quickly. Mom, he's beautiful!"

"Of course he's beautiful. He's my grandchild!"

She dropped the receiver and stared at her husband. "Oh, Dan! It's true! We're grandparents."

He kissed her lips quickly. "Yes, it's true." He drew her against him. "And," he whispered very softly to her, "thank God for those darling

little procreationists! We might never have met without them."

"Never loved."

"Never married."

She smiled up at him. "Let's go see the baby."

"Only if you calm down. Ours isn't due for another two months, and I'd like it to wait until then."

She made a face at him. "I am calm. Oh! My God! We're grandparents!"

"I'll go see that baby without you, Kelly."

"You will not!"

She smiled sweetly, showing him how calm she was, while he helped her back into her clothes.

"Actually," he told her, "you do look like a blimp."

"You wouldn't dare say that if I weren't a grandparent!" she said reproachfully.

He laughed and told her that she was the most beautiful grandmother he had ever seen, and the sexiest. "Definitely the most beautiful pregnant grandmother, ever," he assured her.

And so, naturally, being sophisticated and mature this time around, she stuck out her tongue at him and preceded him out the door.



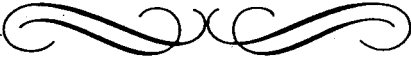


DEBBIE MACOMBER

Thanksgiving Prayer



Claudia and Seth's paths seem to cross quite by chance. Will destiny—or faith—keep them together forever?



The radiant blue heavens wooed Claudia Masters as she boarded the jet for Nome, Alaska. Her heart rate accelerated with excitement. In less than two hours she would be with Seth. A warm feeling of contentment encompassed her. Cooper's doubts and the last-ditch effort to change her mind were behind her now.

"Quitting med school is the most stupid idea I've ever heard," he'd growled, the keen brown eyes challenging the serene blue of hers.

"Sometimes loving someone calls for unusual behavior," she had countered. Anything impractical was foreign to her uncle.

Now, flying high above the barren Alaskan tundra, Claudia was confident she was doing the right thing. Seth had explained many things about life in the North. If he really loved her, she'd thought at first, he should be willing to relocate in Seattle until she'd completed her studies. But as she came to know and love Seth, it became evident that Nome was more than the location of his business—it was his way of life. Crowded cities, traffic jams, shopping malls would suffocate him.

Leaning back, Claudia slowly lowered her lashes as the memories washed over her.

Ashley Robbins, her lifetime friend and roommate, had been ill—far too sick to go to work cleaning rooms at the Wilderness Motel. By

the time Ashley had admitted as much, it was too late to call the motel, so Claudia had volunteered to sub for her.

She was pleased to help her friend. Her own school expenses were paid by a trust fund her father had established before his death. But Ashley maintained two part-time jobs to earn enough to stay in school.

CLAUDIA HAD known from the moment she slid the passkey into the lock of one room that there was something special about it.

Her hands rested on slender hips as she surveyed the quarters. A single man slept here—and he had rested uneasily. The sheet and blankets were ripped from the mattress and dumped haphazardly at the foot of the king-size bed.

As she stripped the sheets, Claudia couldn't help thinking that Cooper would be aghast to know she was doing menial work.

Pausing, she studied the room. There was something about this place: not the room, but the occupant. She could sense a depression, a sadness that seemed to reach out and touch her. Claudia wondered why. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

After cleaning the bathroom and placing fresh towels on the rack, she began to wheel the cleaning cart into the hallway. Again she paused, brushing wisps of copper-colored

hair from her forehead, and again that terrible sadness seemed to reach out to her.

Leaving the cart, she moved to the desk and took a postcard and pen from the drawer. In large, bold letters she printed one of her favorite verses from Psalms. It read: "May the Lord give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed." Psalm 20:4. She didn't question why that particular verse came to mind. It didn't offer solace, and yet it was unhappiness that she had felt. A little unsure, she placed the card in the metal prong that held the dresser mirror in place.

Outside, she checked that the door had locked, her attention still on it as she began wheeling the cart. She hadn't gone more than a few feet when she struck something: a man.

"Oh, sorry," she apologized. "I wasn't watching where I was going." Before her stood the largest, most imposing man she'd ever seen. He looked easily a foot above her five-foot-five frame. His shoulders were wide, his waist and hips lean, and he was so muscular that the material of his shirt was pulled taut across his broad chest. He was handsome in a reckless-looking way, his hair magnificently dark. The full, well-trimmed beard was a shade lighter.

"No problem." The stranger smiled, his mouth sensuous and appealing, his eyes warm.

Claudia liked that. He was a gentle giant.

Not until she was in her car did Claudia realize she hadn't watched to see if the giant had entered that "special" room.

THE CLOUDS were gray and thick the next morning. Claudia was reading over some material from one of her classes when Ashley strolled into the living room.

"Don't you ever let up?" she complained with a long yawn. "I swear all you do is study."

Claudia closed the volume. "Do you always wake up so cheerful?"

"Yes," Ashley snapped. "Especially when I feel I could be dying. You're going to be a doctor—do something!"

"All right," Claudia agreed. "Take two aspirin, drink lots of liquids and stay in bed. I'll check on you later."

"Wonderful," Ashley murmured. "And for this she goes to medical school."

A half hour later, Claudia tapped before letting herself into Ashley's bedroom. "Feel any better?"

"A little." Ashley spoke in a tight voice. She was curled into a ball as if every bone ached.

"You probably have a touch of flu." Claudia set a tray of tea and toast on the nightstand and fluffed up a pillow so her friend could sit up comfortably.

"I'm better, honest," Ashley said and coughed. "Good enough to work."

"Sure, Ash, sure."

CLAUDIA WHEELED the cleaning cart from one room to the next without incident. The small of her back ached, but then she hadn't done much housecleaning in her life. Ashley's mother had been their housekeeper and cook from the time Claudia was small.

Her fingers trembled when she inserted the passkey into the final room—the same one she had finished with yesterday—and her attention flew to the mirror. The card was gone. Well, at least the occupant had discovered that. Slowly she walked around, waiting to feel the sensations of yesterday, but whatever it had been was gone.

Claudia was placing fresh towels in the bathroom when the front door opened.

"Hello." The male voice came from behind her, rich and deep.

"Hello," she mumbled and managed a smile. The man she had bumped into yesterday was framed in the doorway. "I'll be out of your way in a minute."

"Don't go," he insisted. "I want to talk to you." He pulled the card she'd left from his shirt pocket. "Are you the one who left this?"

Numbly she nodded.

His thick brows lifted. "Why?"

"I...I don't really know," she began weakly. "If it offended you, then please accept my apology."

"I wasn't displeased," he assured her, "just curious." He put the card back in his pocket. "Do you think we could have a cup of coffee somewhere when you're through? I really would like to talk to you."

"I..." She looked down on the uniform skirt the motel had provided.

"You look fine."

This stranger assumed she worked as a maid. So many times Claudia had wished she could meet someone without fear of intimidating him with her brains and position. She wasn't an heir to millions, but she

would receive a large cash settlement at age twenty-five, or the day she married—whichever came first.

"I'd like that." Obviously this stranger needed to speak to someone. The open Bible on his nightstand had convinced her he was a Christian.

"There's a coffee shop around the corner," he suggested.

"Fine," she said. "I'll be about twenty minutes."

With the room assignments finished, Claudia returned the cart, then made a stop in the ladies' room. One glance in the mirror and she groaned. Her hair was an unruly mass of auburn curls. She ran her brush through her long tresses until they sparked with electricity. Her thick, naturally curly hair had always been a problem.

The coffee shop was crowded, but Claudia instantly located the stranger, who towered head and shoulders above the other patrons. The welcome in his smile broke the smooth slant of his mouth. He stood and pulled out a chair for her.

"I suddenly realized I don't know your name," she said.

"Seth Lessinger. And yours?"

"Claudia Masters."

"I'm surprised they don't call you Red with that hair."

In any other family she might well have been tagged with the name, but not in hers. "No, I never was."

The waitress arrived and Claudia ordered coffee. Seth asked for a club sandwich.

"What brings you to Seattle?" she asked.

"A conference."

"Are you enjoying the Emerald City?" She was making small talk to hide her nervousness. Maybe meeting with this stranger wasn't such a good idea.

"Very much. It's my first visit to the Northwest, and I'll admit big cities tend to intimidate me."

"Where are you from? Alaska?" She'd meant it as a joke, but he nodded.

"Nome," he supplied. "Where the air is pure and the skies are blue."

"You make it sound lovely."

"It's not." He smiled. "It can be dingy and gray, but it's home. I'm a commissioning agent for a major oil company there. And what about you?"

"Student at the University of Washington." She didn't elaborate.

He frowned. "You look older than a college student."

"I'm twenty-two." She concentrated her gaze on her cup of coffee. "How long will you be in Seattle?"

"I'll be flying back in a few days."

A few days, her mind echoed. She would remember to pray for him. Claudia believed that God brought everyone into her life for a specific reason.

"Why'd you leave the Bible verse in the mirror?"

This was the crux of his wanting to talk to her. How could she explain? She didn't know why she'd done it. "Listen, I've already apologized for that."

A hand twice the size of her own trapped hers. "Claudia." The sound of her name was reassuring. "Don't apologize. The message meant more

to me than you can possibly realize. My intention is to thank you."

The dark, mysterious eyes studied hers. Again Claudia sensed a sadness, a loneliness there. She glanced at her watch. "I...I really should be going."

"Can I see you again? Tomorrow?"

Claudia was afraid he was going to ask her that. Afraid he would, afraid he wouldn't.

"I was planning to do some grocery shopping at the Pike Place Market tomorrow," she said.

"We could meet somewhere." His tone was clipped with a faint challenge. He sounded almost unsure.

"All right," she said. "But if you find large cities stifling, downtown Seattle at that time of the day may be a place you'd wish to avoid."

"Not this time," he said with a chuckle.

They set a time and place as Seth walked her back to the motel and her silver compact car.

NEXT MORNING, Seth was waiting on the library steps when Claudia arrived. Again she noted the compelling male virility. His eyes smiled deeply into hers and held her motionless. Her hand was halfway to her face to remove a lock of maverick hair, but it, too, stopped.

The rough feel of his callused hand removing the hair brought her out of the trance. "Hello, Claudia."

"Seth."

"You're beautiful." The words appeared to come involuntarily.

"So are you," she joked. The musky scent of his cologne drifted pleasantly toward her.

Someone on the busy sidewalk bumped into Claudia, and immediately Seth's hand moved around her protectively. The iron band of his arm continued to hold her close, far longer than necessary. His touch warmed her through the thin jacket. No man had ever produced such a feeling within her. This was uncanny, unreal.

"ARE YOU READY to call it quits?" Claudia questioned.

"More than ready," Seth confirmed.

Seattle's Pike Place Market had always been a hub of activity for tourists and everyday shoppers. Claudia and Seth strolled through the market, their hands entwined.

"I did warn you," she said. "What's the life expectancy rate of someone from Nome, Alaska, in crowds like this?"

"About two hours," Seth murmured. "And we've been at it nearly that. Let's have lunch."

"Sounds good," said Claudia. "Chinese okay?"

For once it was a pleasure to have someone take her out and not try to impress her with the best restaurant in town. They lingered over the tea, delaying as long as possible their return to the hectic pace outside.

"Why do you have a beard?" Claudia asked curiously. Beards had always fascinated her.

Seth looked surprised by the question. "I can't speak for others, but growing one protects my face some during the winter," he explained.

"Want to take a walk along the waterfront?" Claudia suggested, to prolong their time together.

"I'd like that."

Hand in hand, they paused at a department store to study a window display in autumn colors.

Her eyes were laughing into his when Seth placed a possessive hand around her waist, drawing her close. They stepped away from the window and started down the street toward the waterfront.

It was then that Claudia spotted Cooper. Even from this distance she could see the disapproving scowl on her uncle's face.

"I'll get us a taxi," Seth suggested. "I've been walking your legs off." Apparently he thought her pale face was the result of the brisk pace he'd set.

"No, I'd rather walk," she insisted and reached for his hand. "If we hurry, we can make this light."

Their hands were linked when she began to run.

"Claudia," Seth stopped, placing his arm over her shoulders. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said, looking around her. She was certain Cooper had seen them. For once, she didn't want him to ruin things.

"Claudia." Cooper's voice behind her stopped her heart. "Introduce me to your friend."

Frustration washed over her. Cooper would take one look at Seth and judge him as a fortune hunter.

"Cooper Masters, this is Seth Lessinger." The introduction was made grudgingly.

The men eyed each other, exchanging handshakes.

"Masters," Seth repeated. "Are you related to Claudia?"

Cooper ignored the question, instead turning toward Claudia. "Sunday dinner is still set for two. If that's convenient?"

Claudia watched, stunned, as anger darkened Seth's face. He thinks I'm Cooper's wife. "Seth, let me explain," she implored. "Cooper's my uncle."

"And I believe in Santa Claus," Seth replied.

"I've warned you about men like this," Cooper began at the same time, confusing her.

"Will you please be quiet!" she shouted. People were beginning to stare, but Claudia didn't care. "He really is my uncle." Desperately her eyes pleaded with Seth, but his were dark and unreasonable. "You don't want to hear, do you?"

"You're right." Seth turned and walked away. His stride was filled with purpose, as if he couldn't flee fast enough.

"You've really done it this time," she flared at her uncle.

"Really, Claudia," he said. "That type of man is most undesirable."

"That man—" she pointed at Seth's retreating figure "—is one of the most desirable men I've ever known."

*

THE APARTMENT felt large and lonely that evening with Ashley visiting her family for a few days. Claudia forced herself to hit the books. This quarter wasn't going to be easy, and the sooner she sharpened her study habits the better.

Next morning, as she rotated under a hot shower, her thoughts drifted to Seth Lessinger. She would have liked to get to know him better. On Sunday she'd definitely have a talk with Cooper. She was old enough to choose a date without his interference. It was bad enough having to endure a stilted dinner with him every Sunday afternoon.

She dressed in jeans, a plaid long-sleeved blouse and a red sweater vest. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she sat sipping from her mug at the kitchen table and read the morning paper. A quick look at her watch and she hurried out the door for school.

Claudia pulled into the apartment parking lot later that afternoon. It seemed everyone had made plans for this evening. Several of her friends were attending the Seahawk football game. Claudia loved football and decided to watch the game on television. She had no sooner let herself in than the doorbell rang.

"Claudia." Her name was breathed in surprise.

"Seth." Her heart tripped over itself.

"I was looking for Ashley Robins, the motel maid," he told her, the surprise leaving his eyes. "Hoping she could tell me how to find you."

"Ashley?" A pleasant warmth filled her. "Come in," she invited. "We're roommates."

Seth looked slightly ill at ease. "I wanted to apologize for yesterday."

"Cooper is my uncle."

"I should have known that. It wasn't until later that I realized I'd behaved like an idiot." Seth ran a self-derisive hand over his face.

"Your uncle." He chuckled. Wrapping his arms around her, he lifted her and swung her around. Hands resting on the hard muscles of his shoulders, Claudia threw back her head and laughed.

The amusement died as their gazes met and held. Slowly Seth released her and, with an infinite gentleness, touched her face, caressing her smooth skin. It was so sweet that Claudia closed her eyes to the sensuous assault. Her fingers clung to his arms as he drew her into his embrace, and her lips trembled, anticipating his kiss.

Seth didn't disappoint either of them as his mouth settled firmly over hers. His hand slid down her back, molding her against him, arching her upward to meet the demand of his kiss.

Claudia felt her limbs grow weak as she surrendered to the sensations swirling inside her. Her hands spread over his chest, but there was no resistance, only a rightness in the feel of his arms.

When he freed her mouth, his lips caressed the sensitive cord along the side of her neck.

"Does this mean you'll give me another chance?" he murmured.

"I'd say the prognosis is excellent," Claudia replied.

She led the way into the kitchen, poured mugs of coffee and added sugar to his the way she'd seen him do.

"I was going to fix myself a sandwich. Would you like one?" she offered.

"No need to ask, I'm always hungry. Let me help," Seth volunteered.

"Believe it or not, I'm a darn good cook."

"You can slice the cheese if you like." She smiled.

"I hope you don't have any plans for the evening," he said. "I've got tickets for the football game. The Seahawks are playing tonight and I—"

Claudia didn't give him the chance to finish. "I'd love to go." Her eyes were smiling into his.

He slid an arm around her waist, one hand toying with a strand of her hair. "We'll grab something for dinner after the game. All right, Red?" He said the name as if it was an endearment. "You don't mind if I call you that, do you?"

"Only you," she murmured just before his mouth claimed hers. "Only you."

THE DAY WAS wonderful. They spent a good portion of the afternoon talking. Claudia told Seth things she had never shared with anyone: her feelings during her father's short illness and after his death; the ache, the void in her life afterward; and how this had led her to Christ. She told him about her lifelong friendship with Ashley, the mother she had never known, medical school and her struggle for acceptance. There seemed to be nothing she couldn't discuss with Seth.

In return he talked about his oil business, life in Nome and his own faith.

Because the football game was being televised back East, the kick-off time was slated for five o'clock. More than sixty thousand fans filled the Kingdome to capacity. Seahawk

fever ran high and the entire stadium was on its feet for the kickoff. Claudia applauded politely at first, but when it came to her favorite sport, no one could accuse her of being phlegmatic. Within minutes she was totally involved, cheering wildly, or shouting at the officials in protest.

Seth's reaction was much more subdued, and several times when Claudia complained to him about a certain play or the refereeing, she found him watching her more closely than the game.

There was something about football which allowed her to be herself, something which broke down that natural reserve about her.

"Touchdown!" Her arms flew into the air and she leaped to her feet.

Now Seth showed as much emotion as Claudia. Lifting her high, he held her tight against him. Her hands framed his face and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to press her lips to his. Immediately Seth deepened the kiss, wrapping his arms around her, lifting her higher.

The cheering died before either was aware of the crowd.

"We have an audience," Seth murmured.

"It's just as well, don't you think?" Her face was flushed lightly. The effect they had on each other was strong and disturbing. Seth had kissed her only three times, and already they both knew how easy it would be to let their attraction rage out of control. It was exciting, but in another sense it was frightening.

After the game they stopped for hamburgers, followed by an ice-cream sundae.

"When you come to Alaska, I'll have my Inuit friends make you some of their ice cream," he said.

Claudia's stomach tightened. *When she came to Alaska? Deciding it was best to ignore the comment, she said, "Okay, I'll play your little game. What's Eskimo ice cream?"*

"Berries, snow and rancid seal oil."

"Well, at least it's organic."

Seth chuckled. "It's that, all right."

Claudia avoided Seth's gaze, then, gathering her resolve, she raised her eyes. "When will you be returning to Nome?"

Seth reached for her hand. "My flight's booked for tomorrow afternoon."

She offered him a weak smile. "I know this sounds selfish, but I don't want you to go."

"Then I'll stay a few more days," he said casually.

Claudia's heart seemed to burst into song. "Over the weekend?" Eyes as blue as the Caribbean Sea implored him. "My only obligation is dinner Sunday with Cooper, but you could come. In fact, I'd like it if you did. Won't you stay that long?"

Seth chuckled. "I have the feeling he isn't going to welcome me with open arms."

"No." She smiled beguilingly. "But I will."

"Then I'll stay," he said, "but no longer than Monday."

"Okay." She was more than glad, she was jubilant. There hadn't been time to question this magnetic at-

traction that had captured them, and Claudia didn't want to investigate her feelings, even though this was all happening too fast.

Seth's arm slipped around her waist as they walked to the car. He held open the door for her and waited until she was seated.

After fighting the downtown traffic, he parked the car in the lot outside her apartment building but refused her invitation for coffee. "I have a meeting in the morning that shouldn't go any longer than noon. Can I see you then?"

She nodded. "Of course." Every minute left would be treasured. "Shall I phone Cooper and tell him you're coming for dinner Sunday?"

"He won't mind?" Seth queried.

"Oh, I'm sure he will, but Cooper's not so bad." Claudia felt as if she should at least try to explain her uncle. "I don't think he means to come off so pompous. What he needs is a woman to love." She smiled inwardly.

"I need a woman to love," Seth whispered as his mouth found hers. The kiss was deep and intense, as if to convince her of the truth of his words.

Claudia wound her arms around his neck, surrendering to the mastery of his kiss. A shudder of desire ran through her, and she bit into her bottom lip to conceal the effect he had on her senses.

Taking in a deep breath, Seth straightened. "Let's get you inside before this gets out of hand." His voice sounded raw and slightly uneven. "I'll see you about noon tomorrow."

CLAUDIA WAS ready at noon, dressed casually in jeans and a sweater, but when he hadn't shown by one, she became worried. When the phone rang at one-thirty, she grabbed for the receiver.

"Red?" Seth asked. He sounded tired, impatient.

"Yes, it's me."

"I've been held up here. There's not much chance of my getting out of this meeting until late afternoon."

"Oh." She tried to hide her disappointment.

"I know, honey, I feel the same way. But I'll make it up to you tonight. Can you be ready around seven for dinner? Wear something fancy."

"Sure," she said, "I'll see you then. Take care."

Claudia chose a black dress she had bought on impulse the winter before. Made of Cluny lace, the one-piece outfit had a three-tiered skirt. She was unlikely to wear a dress this elegant often, but she'd loved it and couldn't resist.

Her auburn curls were formed into a loose chignon at the top of her head, with tiny ringlets at the sides of her face. The diamond earrings had been her mother's.

Seth arrived promptly at seven. One look at Claudia and his eyes showed surprise, then astonishment. "Wow," was all he said.

"Wow yourself," she returned, equally impressed. Claudia saw him as a virile and intriguing male, but in the rich dark wool suit he was so attractive she could hardly take her eyes off him.

"Turn around, I want to look at you," he said.

Claudia did so, slowly twirling around. "Now you."

"Me?" He looked stunned.

"You." She laughed. "Where are we going?"

"The Space Needle." He took the white coat out of her hands and held it open for her. She heard him inhale sharply before kissing the gentle slope of her neck.

"Let's go," he murmured, "while I can resist other temptations."

The outside elevators whisked them up the Space Needle to the observation deck. The night was glorious; brilliant lights lit up the world below.

"I think my favorite time to see this view is at night. I love watching all those lights," Claudia told him.

They ate a leisurely meal and talked over coffee.

"Can I see you in the morning?" Seth asked later, after driving her home.

She nodded, afraid her voice would tremble if she spoke. His finger traced the line of her cheek and Claudia held her breath. Then he bent downward and gently brushed her lips. Although the contact was light, almost teasing, Claudia's response was immediate. She yearned for the feel of his arms again and felt painfully empty when he turned away as she closed the door behind him.

THEY SPENT almost every minute of Saturday together, their day full and varied.

Cooper phoned to tell her Seth was welcome for Sunday dinner, a gesture that surprised her.

"He's a good man," Cooper announced. "I've been hearing quite a few impressive things about him. And I'll apologize for my behavior the other day," he said.

"I'm sure Seth understands," she assured him.

Six days. She had known Seth only six days, and yet it felt like a lifetime. Her feelings for him were well defined now, the attraction sometimes so strong that it shocked them.

On Sunday morning Claudia woke early, with the eagerness of a child. The past week had been her happiest since before her father's death.

She and Seth attended the early morning church service together, and afterward they went back to her apartment for a light brunch. The table was set with her best dishes and linen. Now she set out fresh-squeezed orange juice and delicate butter croissants. A single candle and dried-flower centerpiece decorated the table.

Claudia had chosen a pink dress and piled her hair high upon her head, with tiny curls falling free. Seth would be leaving tomorrow, so today was special, and she refused to let the reality of a long separation trouble her.

"I hope you're up to my cooking," she said, taking a baked egg casserole from the oven.

Seth stood framed in the doorway, handsome and vital. He wore a dark suit but held the restraining tie in one hand.

Just having him this close made a warm glow steal over her.

"You don't need to worry. But I hope I don't have to wait much longer—I'm starved." He came to her and kissed her lightly. Claudia sighed at the sweetness of his caress.

"You're always hungry," she admonished. "Besides, how can you think about food when I'm here to tempt you?"

"It's more difficult than you know." He smiled.

The egg casserole recipe was one Ashley's mother had given her. Claudia was pleased when Seth asked for seconds.

"Here." Seth handed her a small package. "This thing has been burning a hole in my pocket all morning. Open it now."

"For me?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I brought it with me from Nome."

From Nome? her mind questioned. Carefully she untied the bow and removed the red foil paper, revealing a black velvet jeweler's box.

"Before you open it, I want to explain something." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "For a long time I've been married to my job, building my company. It wasn't until..." He hesitated. "I won't go into the reason, but I decided I wanted a wife. I was reading my Bible one night and came across the story of Abraham sending a servant to find a wife for Isaac. Do you remember the story?"

Claudia nodded, color draining from her features. "Seth, please—"

"After reading that account, I decided to trust the Lord to give me a wife. I prayed about it. I also purchased the engagement ring. And I

asked God for a sign. I was beginning to lose hope—I'd already been here several days before you placed the card with the verse in the mirror. You can't imagine how excited I was when I found it."

Claudia swallowed tightly.

"I want you to come back to Nome with me tomorrow, Red. We can be married a few days later."

*

CLAUDIA'S EYES widened with disbelief. "Married in a few days?" she repeated. "But, Seth, we've only been together six days! What about school?" Somehow the words made it past the large knot constricting her throat.

A troubled look pinched his mouth. "I know how much getting your degree means to you." He caught her hand and gently kissed the palm. "Someday, Red, we'll be able to move to Anchorage and you can finish your schooling. I promise you that."

Taking her hand from his, Claudia closed the jeweler's box. "Seth, we've only known one another a short time. So much more goes into building the foundation for a relationship that will support a marriage."

"Rebekah didn't even meet Isaac, she responded in faith, going with the servant to a faraway land to a man she had never seen. Yet she went," Seth argued.

"You're being unfair," Claudia said. "We live in the twentieth century, not biblical times. How do we know what Rebekah was feeling? She probably had no choice in the

matter. And, anyway, we hardly know each other."

"What more do you need to know?"

Claudia gestured weakly. "Everything."

"Come on, Red. You're overreacting. You know more about me than any other woman ever has. I'm thirty-six, own and operate the Arctic Barge Company, wear size thirteen shoes, like ketchup on my fried eggs. My tastes are simple, my needs few. I tend to be impatient, but we're working on that. Usually I don't anger quickly, but when I do, stay clear."

"Seth, I—"

"Did I leave anything out?" He paused. "Oh, yes. The most important part is that I love you, Claudia Masters."

His sincerity left her speechless.

"This is the point where you're supposed to say, 'And I love you, Seth.'" He rose, hands cupping her shoulders as his gaze fell lovingly upon her. "Now repeat after me. *I... love... you.*"

Claudia tried to say something, but nothing would come. "I can't." She choked out the words. "It's unfair to ask me to give up everything I've worked so hard for. I'm sorry, Seth."

"Claudia!" His mouth was tight. "Don't say no yet. I'm not leaving until tomorrow morning."

She closed her eyes. "I'm supposed to know by then?"

"You should know now," he whispered.

"But I don't," she snapped. "Except that I'm not going to Nome. If you want to marry me, you'll have to

move to Seattle. I won't give up my dreams because of a six-day courtship and the whim that you received a sign from God."

Seth looked shocked for a moment, but recovered quickly. "I can't move to Seattle. My business, my home, my whole life are in Nome."

"But don't you understand? My schooling, my home, my friends are in Seattle."

Seth glanced uncomfortably around the room, then directed his gaze back to her. His dark eyes were filled with such deep emotion, it nearly took Claudia's breath away. Tears shimmered in her eyes as he gently took her in his arms, holding her head to his shoulder. "Red, I'm sorry," he whispered. "I've known all this from the first day. I know it must sound crazy to you now, but think about what I've said. And remember that I love you. Nothing's going to change that. Now let's visit your uncle. I promise not to mention it again today." He kissed the top of her head.

"Here." She handed him the jeweler's box.

"No. I want you to keep the ring. You may not feel like you want it now, but you will soon. I have to believe that, Red."

CLAUDIA SET the alarm for five the next morning. If Seth's flight took off at seven, then she should meet him at the airport at six. She'd volunteered to drive him there, but he declined. He would take a taxi, and meeting him at Sea-Tac International would be far easier for Seth than her driving him there.

Sleep didn't come easily, and when it did, her dreams were filled with questions. Although she searched everywhere, she couldn't find the answers.

The morning was dark and drizzly as she climbed inside her car, and with every mile her heart grew heavier.

She parked in the airport garage and hurried along the concourse. "I'm doing the right thing," she mentally repeated with each step.

She paused when she saw Seth and the dejected figure he made. "Morning, Seth," she greeted him, forcing herself to smile.

His expression remained bland.

This was going to be more difficult than she had imagined. "You're angry, aren't you?"

"No," he responded dryly. "I've gone beyond the anger stage. Disillusioned, perhaps. You must think I'm a crazy man, showing up with an engagement ring and the belief that God had given me a message."

"Seth, no." She placed a hand on his forearm.

"The funny thing is," he continued, "until this minute I didn't accept that I'd be returning to Alaska alone. Even as late as this morning I believed that you'd decide to come with me." He took in a deep breath. "I've behaved like a fool."

"Don't say that," she pleaded.

He glanced at her then; regret and a deep sadness touched his face. "We would have had beautiful children, Red." A hand lightly caressed her cheek.

"Will you stop talking like that," she demanded. "You're being unfair."

He shrugged. "I know. You love me, Red. You haven't admitted it to yourself yet, but you do. The time will come when you can, but I doubt that even then it will make much difference. Because you don't love me enough to leave all this behind." His face scanned the airport interior, but he was looking beyond it.

She wanted to argue with him, but couldn't. Unbidden tears welled in the blue depths of her eyes, and she lowered her head, blinking frantically to still their fall. She needed him, but here in Seattle. She couldn't leave everything behind.

"No, don't say it." He placed a finger over her mouth to prevent any words of regret from spilling out. "I understand, Red. Or at least I'm trying to." He sighed heavily and gently kissed her again. "I have to go—it's time to board the plane." His voice was low and troubled.

He sounded so final, as if everything between them was over. Claudia blinked away the tears that were burning her eyes.

"Goodbye, Red." His lips covered hers very gently. In the next instant, Seth Lessinger turned and strolled out of Claudia's world.

THE DAYS PASSED slowly and painfully. Ashley grew watchful over Claudia's loss of appetite and the dark shadows beneath her eyes. Claudia spent more time in her room alone, blocking out the world, but closing the door on reality didn't keep away the image or the memories of Seth at bay. He was in her thoughts continually, haunting her dreams, observing her days, preying on her mind.

THE FOLLOWING week was wretched, and to complicate her life further, it was coming up to midterm exams. Never had she felt less like studying. Each night she wrote Seth a letter. School had always come first, but suddenly writing letters to Seth was more important. When she did study, her mind wandered to the hurt look on Seth's face before he'd entered the plane. The look haunted her. She did poorly on the first test. Determined to do better on the next series of exams, Claudia forced herself to study. The textbooks lay open on the kitchen table, but Claudia stared into space. Her thoughts were on Seth and the burning question of her future. Was being a pediatrician so important if it meant losing him?

"You look like a lovesick calf," Ashley said as she strolled into the kitchen.

"I feel like one," Claudia returned miserably.

"There's something different about you since Seth's gone."

"No, there isn't," she denied. "It's these tests."

Her roommate gave her a funny look, but said nothing.

Angry with herself, Claudia studied half the night, finally staggering into her bedroom at about three.

Ashley was cooking dinner when Claudia arrived home the next afternoon.

"You had company," Ashley announced.

Claudia's heart stopped. Seth. He had come back for her. She needed so desperately to see him again, to talk to him.

"Seth?" she questioned.

"No, Cooper. I didn't know what time you'd be home, so he decided to run an errand and come back later," Ashley explained.

"Oh." Claudia didn't even try to disguise the disappointment in her voice.

Cooper didn't arrive until they had eaten and were clearing the table. Claudia made a pot of coffee and brought him a cup in the living room.

"You don't look so good," he commented.

"So Ashley keeps telling me." She sat opposite him. "Don't do the dishes, Ash," she called. "Wait until later and I'll help."

"No need," Ashley said. "You go ahead and visit. Call if you need anything."

"No, Ashley." Cooper stood as he spoke. "I think you should be here, too."

Ashley dried her hands and came into the room.

"I don't mean to embarrass you, Ashley, but I think Claudia should know that you contacted me."

"What do you mean?" asked Claudia.

Ashley shrugged. "I've been so worried about you lately. You're hardly yourself anymore. I thought if you talked to Cooper, it might help you make up your mind. You can't go on like this, Claudia."

She leapt up. "This is unfair, both of you against me."

"Against you?" Cooper echoed. "Come now, Claudia."

Tears threatened her eyes, burning for release.

"I think it would be best if I left you two alone." Ashley excused herself, returning to the kitchen.

Claudia hurled her an angry glare.

"I hope you'll talk honestly with me, Claudia," Cooper began. "I'd like to know what's got you so upset that you're a stranger to your own best friend."

"Nothing," she denied, but her voice cracked and the tears began.

Claudia was sure Cooper had never seen her cry.

"Here." He handed her a white handkerchief, crisply pressed.

Claudia wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I'm fine, really," she declared.

"It's about Seth, isn't it?" Cooper prompted.

She nodded, blowing her nose again. "He wants me to marry him and move to Alaska."

The room suddenly became still as Cooper digested the information. "Are you going to do it?" he asked.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be here blubbing like an idiot," she returned defensively.

"I can't help but believe it would be a mistake," Cooper continued. "Lessinger's a good man, but I don't think you'd be happy in Alaska. Where did you say he was from again?"

"Nome."

"I don't suppose there's a university in Nome for you to continue your studies?"

"No." The word was clipped, impatient.

Cooper nodded. "You were meant to be a doctor," he said. "You'll get over Seth. There's probably a fine young man you'll meet later."

"Sure," she agreed without enthusiasm.

Cooper left a few minutes later, and Ashley emerged from the kitchen. "You aren't mad, are you?"

At first Claudia had been, but not now. At least she knew where Cooper stood on the subject of Seth.

"OH, SETH," she whispered that night, sitting up in bed. He hadn't contacted her since his return, not even answering her letters. After several days she understood that the next move would have to be from her. Flipping through the pages of her Bible, she turned to Genesis to reread the story Seth had quoted when he gave her the engagement ring. The Bible confirmed that Rebekah's family asked her if she was willing to go with Abraham's servant, and she'd replied that she would.

Rebekah went willingly! Claudia reread the verses as a sense of release came over her. Her hands trembled as she closed the Bible and stopped to utter a prayer for God's guidance. Already the peace she had so desperately sought was there, and she knew that she, too, would answer Seth in faith and respond willingly.

Slipping out of bed, she opened the drawer that contained the jeweler's box. With a happy sigh, she hugged it to her breast. The temptation was to slip the engagement ring on her finger now. But she'd wait until Seth could do it.

Claudia slept peacefully for the first time since Seth had left. She didn't go to classes the next morning.

Ashley looked at her in surprise. "Did you oversleep? I'm sorry I didn't wake you, but I thought I heard you moving around in your room."

"You did," Claudia answered cheerfully. "I've decided what to do, Ash," she announced. "I love Seth. I'm going to him as fast as I can make the arrangements."

Ashley's blue eyes widened with joy as she hugged her friend. "It's about time. I knew all along that you two belonged together! I'm so happy for you."

Once the decision was made, there seemed a hundred things to deal with. Claudia phoned Nome and reached Seth's secretary, who told her he had flown to Kotzebue on an emergency. She didn't know when he would be back, but would give him the message as soon as he arrived.

Undaunted by the uncertainties, Claudia drove to the university and officially withdrew from school. Next she purchased several outfits for an Arctic winter, and a beautiful wedding dress. Lastly she stopped off at Cooper's office.

He smiled broadly when she entered his office. "You look in better spirits today," he greeted.

"You'd better sit down, Cooper," she said. "I've made my decision. I love Seth. I've withdrawn from school and am having my things shipped north. I'm marrying Seth Lessinger."

Cooper stood, his eyes raking over her. "That's what you think."

IT WAS DARK when the plane made a jerky landing on the Nome runway. Claudia shifted to relieve her muscles, stiff from the bouncing ride. The aircraft had hit turbulent weather shortly after takeoff from Anchorage, and the remainder of the flight could be compared to a roller-coaster ride.

Claudia's blue eyes glinted with excitement as she stood and gathered her small bag from the overhead compartment. There wasn't a jetway to usher her into a dry, warm airport. When she stepped from the cozy interior of the plane, she was greeted by a solid blast of Arctic wind. Her hair flew into her face, and she stood stationary until the force of the wind decreased.

Unexpectedly the small bag was wrenched from her numb fingers and she was pulled into the protective hold of a solid form.

He shouted something at her, but the wind carried his voice into the night.

Claudia tried to speak, but soon realized it was useless. She was half carried, half dragged down the remainder of the steps.

As they came close to the terminal, the door opened, a welcoming warmth immediately stirring life into Claudia's frozen body. Nothing could have prepared her for the intensity of the Arctic cold. Even before she could turn and thank her rescuer she was pulled into his arms.

"Seth?" Her arms slid around his thick-coated waist.

He buried his face in her neck and breathed her name. His hold was

punishing, and when he spoke, his voice was tight.

"Are you all right?" Gently his hands framed her face, pushing back the strands of hair. His eyes searched her features.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "I'm so glad to be here."

"I've been sick with worry," he ground out. "The storm hit here several hours ago, and there wasn't any way your flight could avoid the worst of it."

"I'm fine, really."

Seth released her. The worried look in his eyes had diminished now. "Let's get out of here," he said abruptly and went to secure her luggage.

The suitcases contained only a small part of her possessions. In the days preceding her flight she'd packed her things and arranged to have them shipped in the spring. Everything she could possibly get into the three large suitcases would have to see her through until the freight barge arrived.

They rode to the hotel in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Claudia looked around her in awe. The barren land was covered with snow. The road was merely compact dirt and snow. The buildings were a dingy gray color. She had conjured up romantic pictures of Seth's life in Nome. Reality shattered the vision.

The hotel room was neat and clean—not elegant, but she hadn't expected the homey, welcoming appeal. Seth followed her in, managing the suitcases.

"You packed enough," he said with a sarcastic undertone. Claudia ignored the comment but gave him a

puzzled look. Something was wrong. He had hardly spoken to her since they'd left the airport. Her heart ached for him to hold her. She longed to have him slip the engagement ring onto her finger.

"How's school?" Again the derivative inflection.

"Fine. Let me take your coat?" she offered. As she studied him, the gnawing sensation that something wasn't right increased. Seth unfastened the coat but didn't remove it. He sat at the end of the bed, his face tight and drawn. Then he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands.

"Seth, what's wrong?" she asked calmly.

"I've only had eight hours' sleep in the last four days. A tanker caught fire in port at Kotzebue, and I've been there for the past week. You couldn't have chosen a worse time for a visit. Isn't it a little early for Thanksgiving?"

Claudia wanted to scream that this wasn't a visit, she'd come to stay, to be his wife and share his world. But she remained quiet, guided by some inner sense.

Quietly Seth stood and stalked to the far side of the small room. He seemed to be limping slightly. "I'm flying back to Kotzebue as soon as possible. I shouldn't have taken the time away as it is." He turned around and glared at her. His mouth was drawn and hard. "I'll have one of my men drive you back to the airport for the first available flight to Anchorage." There was no apology, no explanation, no regrets.

Claudia stared back at him in shocked disbelief. Even if he had as-

sumed she was here for a short visit, he was treating her as he would unwanted baggage.

Belying the hurt, she smiled lamely. "I can't see why I have to leave. Even if you aren't here, this would be a good opportunity for me to see Nome."

"Can't you do as I ask, just once?" he shouted.

She lowered her gaze. "There's something I don't know, isn't there?" she asked in quiet challenge.

After a moment of grim silence, "I don't want you here," he said.

"I believe you've made that obvious."

"I tried to reach you before you left." He gestured defeatedly. "It's not going to work between us, Claudia," he said solemnly. "I think I knew that when you didn't return with me when I gave you the ring. You must think I was a fool to propose to you the way I did."

"You know I didn't, I—"

He interrupted her again. "I want a wife, Claudia, not some virtuous doctor out to heal the world. If we married, who's to say you wouldn't regret it later?" he went on. "You've wanted to be a doctor for so many years, and frankly, I don't know if my love could satisfy you. Someday you might have been able to return to medical school—I would have wanted that for you—but my life, my business, everything I need is here in Nome. It's where I belong. But not you, Red." The endearment rolled easily from his lips. "We live in two different worlds. And mine will never satisfy you."

"What about all this business about the sign from God? You were the one who was so sure." She hurled the words at him bitterly, intent on hurting him, too.

"I was wrong. I don't know how I could have done anything so stupid."

Again she had to restrain herself from crying out that it had never been absurd, it was wonderful. But she refused to plead.

"That's not all," he added. "There's someone else now."

Nothing could have shocked her more. "Don't lie to me, Seth. Anything but that!"

"Believe it, because it's true. My situation hasn't changed. I need a wife, someone to share my life. There's—" he hesitated "—someone I was seeing before I met you. I was going to ask her to marry me as soon as I got the engagement ring back from you."

"You're lucky I brought it with me," she shouted as she tore open her purse, grabbed the velvet box and hurled it at Seth.

Instinctively he brought his hands up and caught the box. Their eyes met for a moment, then without another word he tucked it in his coat pocket.

He hovered for a moment by the door. "I didn't mean to hurt you." He lowered his gaze to meet hers.

She avoided his look. "I'm sure you didn't," she whispered, and her voice cracked. "Please leave," she said.

Without another word, Seth opened the door and walked away.

Numb with shock, Claudia couldn't cry, couldn't move. Hold-

ing up her head became an impossible task. A low, protesting moan came from deep within her throat, and she covered her mouth with the palm of one hand. Somehow she made it to the bed, collapsing on the mattress.

Claudia woke the next morning, and a quick lump of pain formed in her throat. She dressed and stared miserably out the window. The winds were blustery, but nothing compared to yesterday's gales. Seth would have returned to Kotzebue. Her world had died, but Nome lived.

She waited an impatient hour, until further lingering became intolerable. Since she was here, she might as well explore the city Seth loved.

The people were friendly and offered an easy smile and a cheery good morning as she passed. There weren't any large stores, nothing to compete with Seattle. She strolled down the walkway, not caring where her feet took her, until she saw the sign ARCTIC BARGE COMPANY—Seth's business. A wave of fresh pain swamped her fragile composure and she turned away. Ahead, she spotted a picturesque white church. Claudia sought peace inside.

The interior was dark as she slipped quietly into the back pew. Thanksgiving would be at the end of the month—a time for sharing God's goodness with family and friends. She was trapped in Nome with neither.

She'd painted herself into a dark corner. She'd lost her apartment. Ashley had found herself a cheaper place and a new roommate. If she

did return to school she would be forced to repeat the quarter.

Claudia poured out her complications in prayer. She had come, following what she thought was God's leading, but it seemed she had made a terrible mistake. Lifting a Bible from the pew, she sat and read, desperately seeking guidance, until she caught a movement from the corner of her eye. A stocky middle-aged man was approaching.

"Can I help you?" he asked her softly. "I'm Paul Reeder, the pastor." He sat beside her in the pew.

She held out her hand. "Claudia Masters."

"Your first visit to Nome?"

"Yes, how'd you know?" she wondered aloud.

He grinned. "Easy. I know everyone in town."

Claudia nodded, reminded of why she had come to Nome.

"Is there something I can do for you, child?"

"I don't think there's much anyone can do."

"Things are rarely as difficult as they seem. Remember, God doesn't close a door without opening a window. Would you feel better if you confided in someone?" he urged gently.

She had to say something. "I quit school and moved to Alaska expecting...a job." The pastor was sure to know Seth, and she didn't want to involve the man. "I was wrong... and now..."

"You need a job and place to live," he concluded. "There's an apartment for rent near here. Since it belongs to the church, the pay-

ments are reasonable." He paused. "You're trained in a specific skill?"

"I have a college degree in premed and have completed one year of medical school, but other than that—"

"My dear girl! You are the answer to our prayers. Nome desperately needs medical assistants. We've advertised for months for another doctor—"

"Oh, please understand," Claudia cried. "I'm not a qualified doctor. I have the book knowledge, but little practical experience."

But Pastor Reeder went on. "There's someone you must meet."

Claudia frowned, but followed Pastor Reeder into the street.

They soon stopped. "While we're here, I'll show you the apartment." He unlocked the door to a small house.

It was the most compact space Claudia had ever seen: living room, miniature kitchen and a very small bathroom.

"It's perfect," she stated positively.

"The apartment isn't on the sewer," the pastor added. "I hope that won't inconvenience you."

"Of course not," Claudia smiled. It must have a septic tank.

He nodded. "I'll arrange for water delivery, then."

Claudia didn't understand, but let the comment pass.

He led her down the street. "I'm taking you to meet a friend of mine, Dr. Jim Coleman."

The doctor's waiting room was crowded with people. Every chair was taken, and small children played on the floor.

The receptionist greeted them warmly. "Good morning, Pastor. What can I do for you?"

"Tell Jim I'd like to see him, right away, if possible. I'll take only a few minutes of his time."

They were ushered into a private office. Fifteen minutes later, a young-looking doctor entered and skeptically eyed Claudia, dark eyes narrowed.

Eagerly Paul Reeder stood and beamed. "Jim, I'd like to introduce you to God's Thanksgiving present to you."

Confusion played over the physician's face. "You're a nurse?"

Sadly Claudia shook her head. "Medical student. Ex-medical student," she corrected. "I don't know if I'll be much help. I don't have much practical skill."

"If you work with me, you'll gain that fast enough." He looked at her as if she had suddenly descended from heaven. "Can you start tomorrow?"

"Sure," she confirmed.

A message was waiting for her when she returned to the hotel. It gave a phone number and name, with information for flights to Anchorage. Crumpling the paper, Claudia checked out of the hotel.

The rest of the afternoon was spent unpacking and settling in the tiny apartment. Hunger pangs finally interrupted her work, and she realized she hadn't eaten all day. She was wondering about dinner, when there was a knock on the door.

Opening it, she found a petite blonde with blue eyes and a friendly smile. "Welcome to Nome! I'm Barbara Reeder," she said and

handed Claudia a warm plate covered with aluminum foil. "Dad's been talking about his miracle ever since I got in this afternoon, and I decided to meet this Joan of Arc myself." Her laugh was free and easy.

Claudia liked her immediately. Barbara's personality was similar to Ashley's, and Claudia learned that she was close to her own age, worked as a legal secretary and was engaged to a man named Teddy. Claudia felt she needed a friend, someone bright and cheerful to lift her spirits.

"Barbara, while you're here, would you mind explaining about the bathroom?" Claudia had been shocked to find that the most important appliance was missing.

"Didn't Dad explain that you aren't on the sewer?"

"Yes, but—"

"Only houses on the sewers have flush toilets, plumbing and the rest. You, my newfound friend, have your very own 'honey bucket.' It's like having an indoor outhouse. When you need to use it, just open the door in the wall, pull it inside and—*voilà*."

"Yes, but—"

"You'll need to get yourself a fuzzy cover, because the seat is freezing. When you're through, open the door, replace it outside and it'll freeze. Oh, and the water is delivered on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Garbage is picked up once a week, but keep it inside or wild dogs will get into it."

"Yes, but—"

"And I don't suppose Dad explained about ordering food supplies, either. Grocery prices can be

four times higher than Seattle, so we order the nonperishables by catalog once a year. The barge from Seattle arrives before winter." Concern clouded Barbara's countenance. "Have I discouraged you?"

But inner strength shimmered in Claudia's eyes. "No, Nome is where I belong," she stated firmly.

JIM COLEMAN proved to be an excellent teacher. Her admiration for him grew with every day. At the end of her first week, Claudia was exhausted. Together they had examined and treated a steady flow of the sick and injured.

Barbara stopped by during Claudia's second week in Nome with an invitation for Thanksgiving Day. Jim had also been invited, along with Barbara's fiancé and another couple. Claudia thanked her and accepted but must have appeared preoccupied, because Barbara left soon afterward. When Claudia left Seattle, she had told Ashley that she hoped the wedding would be around Thanksgiving. Now she would spend the day with strangers.

By six the next evening, Claudia had barely had time to grab a sandwich. She was bandaging a badly cut hand after Jim had stitched it when he stuck his head around the corner.

"I want you to check the man in the first room. Injured leg. I've got a phone call waiting, but I'll join you in a few minutes."

A stray curl of auburn hair fell across her face, and Claudia paused long enough to tuck it around her ear and straighten the white smock.

Tapping lightly, she entered the room. "Hello, my name's—"

Stopping short, she felt her stomach pitch wildly as she saw Seth, his eyes cold and hard. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I work here," Claudia returned, outwardly calm.

Her answer didn't please him, and Seth propelled himself from the examination table in one angry movement. But he couldn't conceal the wince of pain as he placed his weight on the injured leg.

"Jim asked me to look at that leg—now get back on the table."

Seth's dark eyes narrowed mutinously. She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd stalked from the office limping rather than follow her demand. But Jim Coleman entered the cubicle at that precise minute.

"I've been talking to the hospital," he remarked, handing Claudia the medical chart. With a flick of his hand, Jim directed Seth to lie down. Claudia thought her heart would burst. She loved this man, even when he had cast her from his life.

Jim lifted the large bandage, allowing Claudia the first look at the angry wound. Festering with yellow pus, the cut must have been the source of constant, throbbing pain. A faint but distinct red line followed it halfway up his thigh.

"Blood poisoning," Claudia murmured gravely. Anxiously she glanced at Jim.

"Blood poisoning or not, just give me the medicine and let me out of here. I've got a business to run." Seth struggled to sit upright.

"You seem to think you can work with that wound," Jim shot back. "Go ahead if you fancy strapping a wooden peg to your hip the rest of

your life. You need to be in the hospital."

"So you keep saying," Seth retorted.

"I'd like to talk to you in my office a minute, Claudia. Go ahead and wait for me there," Jim asked.

He joined her a moment later. "I've already spoken to the hospital," he said.

Claudia hadn't known Jim long, but she had never seen him more frustrated or angry.

"I've contacted the airport to have him flown out, but there's a storm coming and flying for the next twelve hours would be suicidal," Jim continued. "His leg can't wait that long. I don't have any choice but to send you home with him, Claudia. He's going to need constant care, or he could lose that leg. I can't do it myself, and there's no one else I would trust."

Claudia leaned against the door. She couldn't refuse.

Patiently Jim outlined the treatment for the infection. An hour later, with Seth strongly protesting, Claudia managed to get him into his house and bed. Propping his leg up with a pillow, she removed the bandage to view the open wound. Her eyes clouded with worry as she worked gently and efficiently to make him as comfortable as possible.

"Why are you here?" He repeated his earlier question, his eyes closed.

"I'm taking care of your leg," she replied gently.

At the tender touch of her fingers, he gripped her wrist. "Don't play games with me, Red." He

opened his eyes to hold her gaze. "Why are you in Nome?" The words were weak; every effort was used to disguise his pain. "Have you come back to torment me?"

"I never left," she answered. "We'll talk later and I'll explain then."

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

When she'd finished swabbing the wound, she steeped strips of cloth in clean, hot water. Allowing them to cool slightly, she placed the cloths over his thigh. The process was repeated until the wound was thoroughly cleansed.

"I'm going to lose this leg," Seth mumbled.

"Not if I can help it," she said with a determination that produced a weak smile from him.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, his voice fading.

Claudia gently squeezed his hand. "So am I." Even if she did return to Seattle, there would always be the satisfaction of having helped Seth.

He rested fitfully. Some time later, she again heated water, adding the medicine Jim had given her to the steaming water. She again steeped the strips, draping them around the swollen leg, securing them with a large plastic bag to keep them moist and warm as long as possible.

Two hours later she repeated the process, and again after another two-hour interval. Claudia didn't know what time it was when Jim came.

"How's the fever?" he asked as he checked the sleeping man's pulse.

"High," Claudia replied.

"Give him time," Jim cautioned. He gave Seth another injection and left a few minutes later. Claudia

again applied the hot cloths to draw out the poison.

Claudia bit at her lip anxiously when she took his temperature and discovered the fever still raged.

Another hour passed and he began to mumble incoherently as he slipped into delirium. He tossed his head and Claudia had to hold him down. But unexpectedly, with an amazing strength, Seth jerked upright and cried out in anguish, "John...watch out...no...no..."

Gently but firmly she laid him back against the pillow, murmuring softly in an effort to calm him. Absently she wondered who John was.

She was afraid to leave him, even for a moment, so she pulled the chair as close as she could to his bedside and sank wearily into it. Exhaustion claimed her mind to everything but prayer.

Toward daylight, he seemed to be resting more comfortably and Claudia slipped into a light sleep.

Someone spoke her name and she shifted to find Seth, eyes open, regarding her steadily.

"Good morning," he whispered. His forehead and face were beaded with sweat, his shirt damp with perspiration. The fever, at last, had broken.

A lump of happiness formed in Claudia's throat and she offered an immediate prayer of thanksgiving.

"Good morning," she returned the greeting, her voice light as relief washed over her. His forehead felt moist and cool, and she stood to wipe the sweat from his face with a fresh washcloth.

She helped Seth sit up and removed his damp shirt. They worked

together silently as she wiped him down and slipped a fresh shirt over his head. Taking the washbowl and shirt, she smiled at him and walked toward the door.

"Red, don't go," he called urgently. "We need to talk."

Claudia moved back to the bed. Their eyes locked and a radiant glow of love seemed to reach out to her. She took his hand and rested it against her cheek, closing her eyes. She didn't resist the pressure of his arm that pulled her downward. Kneeling on the carpet beside the bed, she was wrapped in his embrace.

Seth buried his face in the gentle slope of her neck. This was what she'd yearned for from the minute she stepped off the plane—Seth and the assurance of his love.

"I've been a fool," he muttered thickly.

"We both have. But I'm here now, and it's going to take a lot to pry me out of your arms." She pulled slightly away so she'd be able to look at him as she spoke. "If there's anyone to blame, it's me," she murmured as he pressed a kiss against her palm. "I never once told you I loved you."

His hand tightened around hers. "You love me?"

"Very much." She confirmed her words with a nod. "You told me so many times that you needed me, but I discovered it was I who needed you."

"Why didn't you tell me when you arrived that you intended to stay?" His eyes filled with regret. "I thought this was another one of your pen-pal ideas."

"I'm a little slow sometimes," she said. She sat in the chair but continued to hold his hand. "But once I recognized how much I loved you, I couldn't understand why I fought it so long. Once I admitted it to myself, quitting school and leaving Seattle became secondary."

"You quit school?"

"Without even hesitating." She laughed. "I'd make a rotten doctor. Haven't you noticed that I become emotionally involved with my patients?"

"What about your uncle?" Seth asked.

"He's accepted my decision. He's not happy about it, but I think he understands more than he lets on."

"We'll make him godfather to our first son," Seth said and slipped a large hand around her nape, pulling her trembling, soft mouth across the narrow distance to meet his. The kiss was so gentle that tears misted her eyes. Seth's hands framed her face as his mouth slanted across hers, the contact deepening until he seemed capable of drawing out her soul.

JIM COLEMAN stopped by later, but only long enough to check Seth's leg and give him another injection of antibiotic. He spoke frankly, warning him it would take weeks to regain the full use of the leg.

Claudia heated a lunch for both Seth and herself and waited until he had eaten. He fell asleep while she washed the dishes.

Content that he would rest, she opened the other bedroom door, crawled into the bed and drifted into a deep sleep.

She awoke at seven, having slept almost five hours. Sitting up, she stretched, lifting her arms high above her head, rotating her neck to ease the tired muscles.

The house was quiet as she walked back to Seth's room. He was awake, but looked troubled, worried—until their eyes met. The look was gone immediately, replaced by a loving glance that sent waves of happiness through her.

"Hello." She moved inside the room. "Is something troubling you, Seth? You had a strange look just now... a sadness?"

His hand reached for hers. "It's nothing, my love."

Her fingers tested his brow, which was cool, and she smiled. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved. I'll see what's in the kitchen."

Seth nodded absently.

A freshly baked pie was on the kitchen table. When did that appear? Claudia shrugged and opened the refrigerator to find a gelatin salad on the top shelf. When she turned around, she noted that the oven light was on, a casserole dish warming inside. Someone had brought Seth a meal. How thoughtful.

"You didn't tell me you'd had company," she said as she carried in a tray.

He was sitting on the edge of the mattress and she could see him grit his teeth as he attempted to stand.

"Seth, don't," she cried and set the tray down.

He sank back and closed his eyes to mask the pain. "You know, I think you're right about that."

"Here, let me help you." With an arm around his shoulders, she gently lifted the injured leg and propped it against a thick pillow.

"Are you hungry?"

He nodded eagerly and straightened so that she could bring him the tray. "I'm always hungry."

But he hardly touched his meal.

She brought him a cup of coffee from the kitchen after taking away the dinner tray, and sat beside him.

"If you don't object, I'd like Pastor Reeder to marry us," she said.

"You know Paul Reeder?" His eyes shot over her.

Claudia nodded. "I'm very grateful for his friendship. He's the one who introduced me to Jim Coleman—and rented me the apartment. I found the dinner in the kitchen—it wouldn't surprise me if Pastor Reeder had something to do with that, too."

"He did," Seth confirmed. "Paul's the one who talked to me about faith. I greatly respect the man."

"I suspected as much," said Claudia. "I haven't heard him preach yet, but I bet he packs a powerful sermon."

"He does," Seth said and closed his eyes.

An hour later when she checked on Seth, he appeared to be asleep. Leaning down, she kissed his brow. She was undecided about spending another night.

"Seth," she whispered, "I'm going home for the night. I'll see you early tomorrow morning."

"No." He sat up and winced, seeming to have forgotten his leg. "Don't go, Red. Stay tonight. You

can leave in the morning if you want." He reached for her, holding her so tight she ached.

"Okay, my love," she whispered tenderly. "Just call if you need me."

"I'll need you all my life. Don't ever forget that, Red."

He sounded so adamant that she frowned, drawing her delicate brows together. "I won't forget."

CLAUDIA WAS in the kitchen the next morning putting on a pot of coffee when she heard a car pull up outside.

It was Barbara Reeder.

"You're out bright and early this morning," Claudia said cheerfully.

"I just put on coffee."

"Morning," Barbara smiled.

"How's the patient?"

"Great. So much better than just two days ago."

"I was sorry to miss you yesterday," Barbara pulled out a chair and unbuttoned her parka. "I brought by dinner, and you were in the bedroom sound asleep. I understand you were up all night, so I didn't want to wake you."

"Funny, Seth didn't say anything," said Claudia.

Barbara looked mildly surprised.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"That man, honestly!" Happiness gleamed from her eyes. "You'd think it was top secret." She held out her left hand for Claudia to admire the diamond. "Teddy and I are going to be married next month."

"TEDDY?" Claudia's stomach felt as if someone had kicked her, but she managed to conceal her shock.

"It's confusing, I know," Barbara laughed. "But Seth has always reminded me of a teddy bear. He's so big and cuddly, it seemed only natural to call him Teddy."

Claudia's hand shook as she poured coffee into two mugs. Barbara continued to chat excitedly about her wedding plans, but strangely, Claudia felt no emotion.

"Teddy changed after John's death," Barbara added.

"John," Claudia repeated the name. Seth had called it out several times while his fever raged.

"John was his younger brother, and partner in Arctic Barge. There was an accident—I'm not sure I ever got the story straight. Seth was with John when it happened. Something fell on top of him and ruptured his heart. He died in Seth's arms."

Claudia stared into the coffee. From that first day she'd walked into the Wilderness Motel, she'd known there was a terrible sadness in Seth's life. "Could I ask a favor of you?" she said. "Would you mind dropping me off at my apartment? It should only take a minute."

"Of course. Then I'll come back and surprise Seth with breakfast."

He'd be amazed all right, Claudia thought.

She managed to maintain a fragile poise until Barbara dropped her off. Waving her thanks, she entered her tiny home. She looked around the room that had so quickly become her own, and bit the inside of

her cheek. With purposeful strides she opened the lone closet and pulled out her suitcases. She folded each garment with unhurried care and placed it neatly inside the leather luggage.

Someone knocked at the door, but Claudia ignored it.

"Open up, Claudia, I know you're in there. I saw Barbara drop you off." It was Jim Coleman.

"Go away," she cried, and her voice cracked.

Ignoring her lack of welcome, Jim pushed open the door and stepped inside the room. "I want you to listen to me for a minute." Clearly he was angry.

"No, I won't listen. I'm leaving and you can't talk me out of it. Go away, just go away."

"Will you stop acting like a lunatic and listen? You can't leave now."

She whirled around. "Can't leave? You just watch me. I don't care where the next plane's going, I'll be on it," she shot out, then choked on a sob.

Jim took her in his arms. Claudia struggled at first, but he held her gently. "Let it out," he whispered.

Again she tried to jerk away, but, undeterred, Jim held her fast, murmuring comforting words.

"You knew all along, didn't you?" she said.

Jim arched one brow and shrugged his shoulders. "Not until yesterday. No one could look at the two of you without knowing you're in love. Did you say anything to Barbara?"

Claudia shook her head. "No. I couldn't. Why does it have to be Barbara?" she asked.

"Why?" she asked. "Why couldn't it be some anonymous soul I could hate? And she's so in love with him. You should have heard her talk about the wedding."

"I have," Jim stated.

"I'm not going to burst that bubble. I don't think Seth knows what he wants. He's confused and unsure. The only thing I can do is leave."

Jim turned and regarded her steadily. "You can't go now. You don't seem to understand what having you in Nome means to me, to all of us. When Pastor Reeder said you were God's Thanksgiving gift to us, he wasn't teasing. I've been praying for someone like you for months. Will you stay a bit longer, at least until someone answers our advertisements in the medical journal? Two, three months at the most."

Gesturing weakly, Claudia nodded. She was in an impossible position.

Jim sighed gratefully. "Thank you. I promise you won't regret it." He glanced at his watch. "I'm going to talk to Seth. Something's got to be done."

Claudia stood by the door. "Why haven't you married?"

"Too busy in medical school," he explained. "And now, no time to date the one I wanted."

There was something strange about the way he spoke, or maybe it was the look in his eyes. Claudia placed a hand on his arm. "You're in love with Barbara, aren't you?" If she hadn't been caught in her own problems, she would have realized it long before. Whenever Jim talked about Barbara there was a softness in his tone.

He began to deny his feelings, but caught the knowing look in Claudia's eyes. "A lot of good it's done me. I'm nothing more than a family friend. Barbara's been in love with Seth for so long, she doesn't even know I'm around."

"Does Seth love her?"

"I don't know. But he must have some genuine affection for her or he wouldn't have proposed."

Both became introspective, unable to find the words to comfort each other. Jim walked out the door a minute later and Claudia watched him go.

No sooner had the last suitcase been tucked away than there was another knock at the door.

Barbara's cheerful smile greeted her. "Are you busy?"

Claudia had her back turned, but, forcing a smile, she said, "Come on in."

Barbara held out a large gift-wrapped box. "I know you're probably exhausted and this is a bad time, but I wanted to give this to you now. I'll only stay a minute," Barbara confirmed. "Jim Coleman came by. He wanted to see Teddy alone for a few minutes, so it was the perfect time to run this over. It's just a little something to show my appreciation for all you've ever done for Teddy."

Lifting the lid, Claudia discovered a beautiful hand-crocheted afghan in bold autumn colors of gold, orange, yellow and brown. She couldn't restrain the gasp of pleasure. "Oh, Barbara!" She marveled at the work that had gone into it, blinking to forestall the tears.

"It's hardly enough," Barbara said. "God sent you to Nome as a

helper to Jim, a friend to me and a nurse for my Teddy."

A low moan of protest escaped Claudia's parched throat. She couldn't refuse the gift—or explain to Barbara why she'd come to Nome.

"How... how long have you been engaged?" she asked.

"Only a few days."

Claudia's gaze rested on the sparkling diamond. At least it wasn't the same ring he'd offered her.

"His proposal had to be about the most unromantic you can imagine," Barbara smiled. "I didn't need a fortune-teller to realize he's in love with someone else."

Claudia's breathing became shallow. "Why would you marry someone when he..."

"It sounds strange, doesn't it?" Barbara said. "But I love him, I have for years. We've talked about this other girl. She's someone he met on a business trip. She wasn't willing to leave everything behind for Teddy and Nome. Whoever she is, she's a fool."

With a determined effort Claudia was able to smile. "You'll make him a wonderful wife. And you're right, the other girl was a terrible fool." Her mouth twitched with the effort of maintaining a smile.

THAT AFTERNOON Jim phoned and asked if Claudia could meet him at the office. An outbreak of flu had apparently hit Nome and several families had been affected. He needed her help immediately.

Several hours later, Claudia was tired out. She came home and cooked a meal, then didn't eat. She washed the already clean dishes and

listened to a radio broadcast until she realized it wasn't in English.

The next days were exhausting. The strain of flu reached epidemic proportions. Both Jim and Claudia were on their feet eighteen hours a day, traveling from house to house because the sick were often too ill to come into the city.

When the alarm sounded early in the morning of the fifth day, Claudia groaned. Every muscle ached, her head throbbed and it hurt to breathe. She forced herself to sit on the edge of the bed, but her head swam and waves of nausea gripped her. She lay back on the pillow, groping for the telephone, and sluggishly dialed Jim's number to tell him she was the latest flu victim.

Jim promised to check on her later, but Claudia knew she just needed sleep.

Suddenly she was chilled to the bone and shivered uncontrollably, incorporating the iciness into her dreams. She was lost on the tundra in a heavy snowstorm, searching frantically for Seth. Then it was warm, hot even.

"Red?" A voice sliced into her consciousness.

Gasping, Claudia's eyes flew to her one chair. Seth sat with his leg propped on the ottoman. A worried frown furrowed his brow. Claudia flashed him a chilling glint. "How'd you get in here?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Jim Coleman let me in. He was concerned about you. I thought I should volunteer. I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything, Seth Lessinger."

He responded with a gentle smile. "I'm not going to argue with you. How are you feeling?"

"Like someone ran over me with a two-ton truck." She leaned against the pillow. The pain in her chest continued, but it hurt less to breathe if she was propped up.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to Barbara," he said. "She's been helping Jim and her father. But I'm going to explain things. We're having dinner tonight."

"Seth, please. Barbara loves you, while I..."

"You love me, too."

"I'm going back to Seattle, Seth. I was wrong to have ever come north."

"Don't say that, Red. Please."

She slid down into the bed and pulled the covers over her shoulders. Closing her eyes, she hoped to convince him she was going back to sleep.

CLAUDIA WAS awake when Seth came in again. His limp was less pronounced.

"What are you doing here?" She was shocked at how weak her voice sounded.

"Barbara's got the flu," he murmured. "I didn't get to see her for more than a couple of minutes." He lowered himself into the chair.

Instantly Claudia was angry. "You beast! You should be with her, not me. She's the one who needs you."

"Barbara's got her father. You've only got me," he said.

Wearily she slumped back and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in her chest.

Cool fingers rested on her forehead. "Would you like something to drink?"

Nodding was almost more than she could manage.

The tea hurt to swallow and she shook her head after the first few sips.

"I'm phoning Jim. You've got something more than the flu."

"Don't," she whispered. "I'm all right, and Jim's so busy." Her heavy eyelids drooped, and Claudia returned to a fitful slumber.

Faintly she could hear Jim's voice, as if he were speaking in the distance.

"I'm glad you phoned." His voice was anxious.

Gently she was rolled to her side and an icy-cold stethoscope was placed against her bare back. "Do you hear me, Claudia?" Jim's voice asked.

"Of course I hear you." Her voice was strained.

"I want you to take deep breaths."

Every inhalation burned like fire.

"What is it, man?" Seth was standing above her.

Jim Coleman sighed heavily. "Pneumonia."

"AM I DYING?" Claudia whispered weakly. Cooper and Ashley stood looking down at her.

"You'll live," Ashley said.

"Why didn't you let me know things hadn't worked out here?" Cooper demanded.

Sparks of irritation flashed from Claudia's blue eyes.

Jim Coleman chuckled, and for the first time Claudia noticed him. Standing at the foot of her bed, he

read the chart and smiled wryly. "You're looking better all the time. But save your strength to talk some sense into these folks. They seem to think they're going to take you back to Seattle."

Claudia rolled her head away so that she wouldn't need to look at Jim. "I am going back," she mumbled.

A short silence followed. Claudia could feel Cooper's eyes boring holes into her back, but to his credit he didn't say anything.

"You've got to do what you think is right," Jim said.

"All I want is to go home. And the sooner the better." Oddly, she had never considered Cooper's penthouse condominium home until now. She'd return to Seattle and rebuild her life. Maybe look into the fancy Swiss medical school her uncle had been so keen about.

"I don't think it's such a good idea to rush," Jim said, and Claudia could tell by the tone of his voice that he'd accepted her decision. "I want you to gain back some of your strength before you go."

"Pastor Reeder has offered to have you stay and recuperate at his home until you feel up to traveling," Ashley added.

"No." Claudia's response was adamant. "I want to go back to Seattle as soon as possible. Cooper was right, I don't belong in Nome. I shouldn't have come." The words produced a strained silence. "When will I be discharged, Jim?"

"Tomorrow, if you like," he said solemnly.

"Thanksgiving Day," Ashley announced.

Claudia relaxed against the pillows, weak after the short visit, and slipped into a restful slumber.

When she awoke an hour later, Seth was sitting at her bedside. "Hello, Seth," she whispered. Her fingers longed to reach out and touch his haggard face. He looked as if he hadn't slept in several days.

"Hello, Red." He paused. "Claudia," he corrected. "Cooper and Ashley arrived okay?"

She nodded. "They were here this morning."

"I thought you might want someone with you."

"Thank you. They said it was you who phoned."

Seth shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll marry Barbara, won't you?"

The hesitation was only slight. "If she'll have me."

Claudia put on a brave smile. "I'm sure she will. She loves you. You'll have a good life together."

"And you?"

"I'm going back to school." Her smile died.

He stood and walked across to the window, his back to her. "I couldn't let you go without telling you how desperately sorry I am," he began before returning to the chair at her side. "It was never my intention to hurt you."

"Don't, please." Her voice wobbled with the effort to suppress tears. Seeing Seth humble himself this way was her undoing. "It's not your fault. We've both learned a valuable lesson. We should never have sought a supernatural confirmation in this. Faith comes from walking daily with

our Lord until we're so close as to know His will."

Until then Seth had avoided touching her, but now he took her hand and gently held it. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

He nodded. "I won't see you again," he said, as very gently he lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. "God go with you, Red, and may your life be full and rewarding." His eyes were haunted as he turned and walked from the room.

"Goodbye, Seth." She closed her eyes, unable to watch him leave.

AS SOON AS they arrived at the airport the next day, Cooper removed the suitcases from the trunk and Ashley helped him carry them inside.

Jim opened the back door and gave Claudia a hand, quickly ushering her inside the warm terminal. His fingers held hers longer than necessary. "I've got to get back to the office."

"I know. Thank you, Jim. I'll always remember you," she said. "You're the kind of doctor I hope to be—dedicated, gentle, compassionate. I deeply regret letting you down."

Jim hugged her fiercely. "No, don't. You're doing what you must. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you here. Maybe we'll meet again someday." He returned to the car, pausing to wave.

"Goodbye, Jim."

Ashley was at her side immediately. "You made some good friends

in the short time you were here, didn't you?"

Claudia could only nod.

A few minutes later, Claudia watched as the incoming aircraft circled the airstrip. She was so intent that she didn't notice Barbara walk into the terminal.

"Claudia," she called softly and hurried over. "Don't leave." Barbara's hands were clenched at her sides. "Think of Seth."

"Please don't say that," Claudia pleaded. "Seth's yours. This whole thing was a terrible misunderstanding."

"Seth will never be mine," Barbara countered swiftly. "It's you he loves, it'll always be you."

"I didn't mean for you ever to know."

"If I hadn't been so blind, so stupid, I would have guessed right away. I thank God I found out."

"Did... Seth tell you?" Claudia asked.

Barbara shook her head. "He didn't need to. From the moment Jim brought you into the hospital, Seth was like a madman. He wouldn't leave, and when Jim literally escorted him out of your room, Seth stood in the hallway grilling anyone who went in or out."

For a moment Claudia couldn't speak. A hoarseness was blocking her throat. She put on a false smile and gently shook her head. "Good heavens, you're more upset about my leaving than I am. Things will work out between you and Seth once I'm gone."

"I once said, without knowing it was you, that the girl Teddy'd met

was a fool. If you fly out of here, you're a bigger fool than I thought."

Paralyzed by indecision, Claudia turned to Cooper.

"Don't look at me," he told her. "This has got to be your own choice."

"Do you love him?" Ashley asked her gently.

"Yes, oh yes."

Ashley inclined her head toward the door. "Then why are you standing here?"

"What about you?" Claudia asked Barbara softly.

"I'll be all right. Seth was never mine. Hurry, Claudia, go to him. He's at the office. He needs you." She handed Claudia her car keys, smiling broadly through her tears.

Claudia took a step backward. "Ashley... Cooper, thank you. I love you both."

SETH'S BUILDING was deserted when Claudia entered. The door leading to his office was tightly shut. She tapped lightly, then stepped inside.

Seth stood with his back to her, his attention centered on an airplane making its way into the sky.

"If you don't mind, Barbara, I'd rather be alone right now." His voice was filled with stark pain.

"It isn't Barbara," she whispered softly.

Seth spun around. "What are you doing here?"

Instead of answering him, she moved across the room until she was standing in front of him. "I love you, Seth Lessinger. I'm yours now and for all our lives."

Groaning, he hauled her fiercely into his arms. "You'd better not

change your mind, Red. I don't have the strength to let you go a second time."

"HONEY, what are you doing up?" Seth wandered sleepily from the master bedroom. Claudia watched her husband with a translucent happiness, her heart swelling with pride and love. They'd been married almost a year now: the happiest twelve months of her life.

Seth moved behind her; his hand closed over her hip before sliding around the full swell of her stomach. "Is the baby keeping you awake?"

Claudia relaxed against him, savoring the gentle feel of his touch. "No, I was just thinking about tomorrow."

Seth gave an exaggerated sigh. "It can't be our anniversary. That isn't until the end of the month."

"No, silly, it's Thanksgiving."

"Barbara and Jim are coming, aren't they?"

"Yes, but she insisted on bringing the turkey. You'd think just because

I was going to have a baby I was helpless."

"Those two are getting pretty serious, aren't they?"

"I think it's more than serious. It wouldn't surprise me if they got married before Christmas."

"It may be sooner than that. Jim's already asked me to be his best man," Seth murmured, and his mouth nibbled at her earlobe with little kisses.

"I don't know how you can love me in this condition." She turned and slipped her arms around his middle.

"You're not so bad-looking from the neck up," he teased affectionately and kissed the tip of her nose. "Has it been a year, Red?" His gaze grew serious.

She nodded happily. "There's no better time to thank God for each other, and for His love."

"No better time," Seth agreed, his arm cradling her close. "When I thought I had lost you forever, God gave you back to me."

"It was fitting that it should have been Thanksgiving Day, wasn't it?"

"Very fitting," he murmured, leading her back into their room.





SHIRLEY LARSON

Wit and Wisdom



It's not easy to love a stand-up comic—
especially if he can't love you back. But Alison
knows her own mind, and heart, and for Joel it
was no laughing matter.

On a steamy June night in New York City, Alison Powell looked up at an orange neon sign flashing a club's name, N'yuk N'yuks, then thrust a shapely leg from the cab and stepped onto the sidewalk. She was out of her element, too far from home, and she felt ill at ease. She was also plagued with a strong sense of *déjà vu*. *Look, what we had is done, finished, through.*

Shutting her mind to that insidious male voice that she remembered too well, Alison turned to face the flashing neon, her shoulders straightening. Anticipation tightened her stomach. She was walking into a trap, the path to which was strewn with memories she'd spent three years trying to forget.

A feminine head of dark curls the same shade as Joel's emerged from the shadows, and Tracy Brandon grabbed her arm. "There you are. I thought you'd lost your nerve. We're ten minutes late. We'll be lucky if he hasn't already started."

At the bottom of the entry stairs, Joel's eyes stared at Alison from a life-size poster advertising him as the reigning comedian. He wasn't handsome, but he had an arresting face, with dark, winged eyebrows, a well-cut mouth and a smooth, tight jaw.

He looked exactly the same and yet... there was a cynical wariness, a weariness, as well. She supposed he had a right to look tired. After a slow, dry time, he'd clicked on a late-

night talk show in California and a year later, had taken New York by storm. It was standing room only tonight for Joel Brandon.

Alison followed Tracy deeper into the murky darkness. Tracy gave her name to a young woman in black tights, abbreviated top and minuscule skirt, and she conjured up a tiny table for two right under the stage that bore a Reserved sign. Alison ordered a gin and tonic, Tracy a fuzzy navel, just as an announcer, dressed like a circus clown, ended his intro with "And now here's the man you've all been waiting for. Please give a big welcome to Mr. Joel Brandon..."

He wore pleated gray pants, a muted gray-to-rose striped shirt and a narrow tie. Over them he had slung a classically too-big jacket and pushed the sleeves up to his elbows. His understated clothes drew attention away from his long legs and whipcord-lean body and spotlighted his face. His dark hair was cut in a casual style, his brown eyes accented with stage makeup.

Alison felt light-headed. Was it her imagination or had he really given her that slicing, sideways look?

SO HIS CHARMING woman from the past had come. Joel would have laid odds that she'd back out at the last minute. She was too close to the stage for him to look at her directly, but he could see the way she sat

stiffly at the table. In a white summer dress that left her shoulders bare, her smooth, glistening flesh gleamed in the light from the stage. Laces like those on a kid's sneaker held her dress so tightly over her breasts that not a sliver of bare flesh showed through.

But those bare shoulders invited a man's touch. Once he'd been the man to touch her.

Brandon, you're in the middle of a monologue. He went on telling the joke about his father that was half fantasy, half truth, glad he knew the routine so well that he could recite it in his sleep. Thank God Tracy had broken her promise and warned him about Alison.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her. He'd been working a small club in Waterloo, Iowa. God, he'd hated that club...until the night Alison walked in. She'd been with a group of young women, all celebrating their graduation from teachers' college. They had invited him to join them for a drink, and Alison had aroused his curiosity. She seemed out of place in the raucous group, and he'd discovered that she was shy. She was also attracted to him.

Alison thought, *He's good. He generates a mood, unifies the audience. They love him. He made it easy for them, just as he once had her...*

How much later the audience finally allowed him to leave the stage, she couldn't have said. But the velvety voice that seemed to be part of her was saying, "Thank you, all, you've been a marvelous audience. Keep your father awake, don't give a computer an even break and have

a good evening." He blew them a kiss and escaped.

"I hate to give the devil his due, especially when he's my brother, but he is talented, isn't he?" Tracy beamed.

Alison managed a smile. "Very."

"I told Joel I'd come backstage."

With an odd little look in Alison's direction, Tracy rose and made her way to a door that opened into a long hall. Tracy went to the second door on the right, grabbed Alison's arm and marched in.

Straight ahead of her, Joel Brandon stood undressing. He looked as if he'd used up every scrap of nervous energy onstage. Drained of that, he was undressing by sheer force of will.

Arrested, he stared at Alison. As the shock melted from his face, a subtle, more basic emotion reshaped his mouth and wiped away the fatigue. A male arrogance that said, *Why should I worry about having you see what you've already seen and enjoyed?* For a second and an eternity he gazed at her. Then, with his brown eyes still fastened to hers, he raised his pants with lazy grace, did up the waist clasp and ran up the zipper. His eyes shifted to Tracy. "There's a quaint old American custom. It's called knock before entering."

"Sorry, brother." Tracy didn't sound it. She planted a kiss on his cheek. "Next time I'll be ever so discreet."

"That would be a first," he said dryly.

"Aren't you going to say hello to Alison?"

Joel folded his arms and leaned back against the counter. "Hello, Alison." Once he'd looked at her with admiration, warmth and intimacy. The look was gone.

"Hello, Joel." Meeting Joel's eyes head-on took all the nerve she had. This time, there was no stage between them.

Joel's eyes skimmed back to Tracy, his face smoothing into politeness. "Are we still going to have a drink together at my place?"

"I've got nothing else to do," Tracy told him. "Alison doesn't have any plans, either, do you?" Tracy's innocent eyes in her wise face told Alison she'd been maneuvered with real expertise.

"I'm glad to hear it," Joel's expression in the mirror was carefully casual, his skin pulling along his jaw as he wiped the cream away. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up with you." He raised his eyes to Alison's in the mirror. His face bare and shiny, he looked arrogantly masculine and still...strangely vulnerable. As if he realized that, his eyes flickered away. "You will excuse me while I shower and change?"

"Take your time, brother," Tracy told him airily.

A few minutes later, in their taxi, Tracy said to Alison, "You don't think the publicity is turning his head, do you? He was rather...cool toward you."

Alison watched the blur of lights flow alongside the cab. "Why shouldn't he be? We are strangers, after all."

"Joel never told me what happened. I suppose you won't, either."

"It isn't important now."

"I thought maybe—Joel means a lot to me." Tracy stared out. "I suppose you know his childhood wasn't exactly ideal. Dad was so hard on him. He expected Joel to be Superman. The funny part of it is Joel nearly succeeded. He was bright, and he was a good athlete. But the year he was sixteen Dad turned even more critical. That made it impossible for me to stay neutral. I chose Joel. Dad had Mother. You were so good for him in those early days. He came back from Iowa the summer you met and was so happy that I—" She broke off. "I always wanted you two to get together. There's no chance that this time—"

"No," Alison said firmly. "No chance at all." Alison had kept in touch with Tracy, mostly because she had insisted. On that last visit to New York three years ago, she'd grown to like Tracy. Knowing something had gone wrong, Tracy had written to Alison feverishly, answering her friend's every letter immediately. For Tracy's sake, she had to get through this evening gracefully.

Joel's apartment told her that he was richer and more successful than she'd thought a man could get telling funny stories. The luxurious condominium on the fifteenth story of a new building overlooking the Long Island Sound oozed comfort and money.

Alison walked to the window wall at the far end of the living room. Lights twinkled in a thousand pinpoint stars, cars flowed over the streets, the water gleamed silvery pink in the glow of streetlights. Joel

his feet in more ways

row, you'll be off in the wilds of the Adirondacks—"

A few minutes later Tracy was gone. The apartment seemed quiet without her breathless presence. Holding her glass, Alison walked to the window again.

In the silence the phone rang. The recorder clicked on; Joel's voice filled the room. Then a feminine voice, low, husky, said, "Joel? Give me a call when you come in." The woman clearly knew Joel would recognize her voice and hadn't left a name or number.

The second caller had a bubbly laugh and wasn't quite so sure of herself. She left her name and number.

The third woman's name was Helen, and she had just enough of a European accent to make her sound exotic and lovely. When she reminded Joel about what a wonderful time they'd had together that Monday night, Alison got her purse. What a fool she'd been, imagining him alone and lonely.

She jerked open the apartment door and nearly knocked Joel down. "Alison? What's the matter?"

"Your sister's gone to keep a late date, and I—was on my way out."

"You waited until I got here...but now you're going?" If anything, he looked more finely drawn than he had in the dressing room. "Surely you can stay for a few minutes—Damn it, don't look at me that way. We're not strangers."

"Yes, we are," she said, knowing it was true.

"Once upon a time, we weren't." His lean body outlined by the soft,

oes draw a person, Tracy said when she son a few minutes a gin and tonic. "I r takes the time to bably not." Tra-away. "My guess t way, by not ap-had in you."

pened between her last thing Alison about. She turned 'd known you were up a lot of ancient never have come."

You were as curious he was to see you—supposed to let *that* bag."

he rang. "Saved by the murmured, as the re-nd table clicked onto

van Brody," a masculid. "I was told I could Brandon at this num-

ew for the recorder. m here...." He was the a her life.

behind her, Tracy said, Evan wants me to meet Hyatt. I told him we were for Joel. Shall I say an

e's no need for you to wait." you sure?"

n reached for strength inside "Will you stop? You make d as if I can't spend a few s alone with Joel."

y paused. "I suppose it t really matter. After tomor-

dark wood, he was all male; sure of himself on his own turf.

"Long ago and far away. Fairy-tale stuff—"

He reached for her. "Stop distancing me with those cool words and that cool look and that damn dress." He captured her arm with one hand while the other came up to her chest. She felt the sharp tug on the laces of her dress, and made a move as if to escape, but his fingers tightened on her arm and his eyes warned her not to lie about what she was feeling. The cotton ties sang through the loop, and dangled free. "I've forgotten," he murmured, "how much fun it is to surprise the cool, unflappable Miss Powell."

He hooked a finger under the last loop and the material gave, the narrow, silken valley of tanned flesh between her breasts gleaming through the white cloth. She said coolly, "In the last five minutes, three women called for you."

Just as coolly, he stood gazing at her. Then he shrugged. Almost as if he didn't realize what he was doing, he dragged a lazy finger over the very top of the breasts he'd exposed. Under his touch, her skin burned. "Is that why you were running out of here? Because you didn't care for the competition?"

"I withdrew from the race a long time ago."

She moved to walk around him, but he caught her by both arms. "You're not really planning on leaving."

"Yes," she said steadily, "I am."

His eyes mocked her gently, but she caught a flicker of compassion there. "Yes, I suppose you are." He

shook his head. "Wait a minute. You can't go out there like that. Casually, he caught the laces, loosened and redid them into a bow, his eyes on the job. "Tell me you've landed a plum job this summer up in the Adirondacks teaching kids how to tell the difference between vines from poison ivy."

"I have a teaching job at a summer day camp, yes."

"Busy, involved, intense. Alison. You'd better have a care. You might be wolves in those rags and taints."

"You mean the kind that are indigenous to both country and climate?" She gazed steadily at him.

He smiled. "Are you saying you're a member of the species?"

"If the shoe fits—"

"The shoe doesn't fit, Alison."

Amazed to see the light of amusement fade from his eyes, Alison was suddenly alert and guarded. "Twenty minutes ago, before my phone recorder started suffering from burnout, I might have believed you."

"You think I'm lying, just as you did three years ago." He gazed at her.

"It doesn't matter. It's too late now to worry about."

"Is it?" he drawled.

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "Let's just... forget it."

He found it interesting that she was angry, and the truth came from his lips—a truth he'd been unwilling to say that night. "That woman was my agent, Alison."

She met his gaze steadily. "It didn't matter who she was. What mattered was that you wanted out."

"Was I that obvious?"

"Painfully so. But don't lose sleep over it, Joel. I considered it a learning experience."

"What did you learn?"

"I learned that we're too different, you and I."

Shaken by her words, he stared at her. He'd thought the break between them had been related to trust. "I thought you liked my light-hearted, devil-may-care approach to life."

"I did at first, but—"

"The luster began to pall. But you were trying to keep it going by coming to see me. How thoughtful. My being with Liz at that moment wasn't a tragedy, it was an opportunity for you to break things off, wasn't it?" Strange how angry that made him feel when it had happened so long ago. "And what about now, Alison? Why did you come to New York?"

"I came to see Tracy—"

He said a rude word about what he thought of that lie, grasped her shoulders and turned her so that her back was to the door. "We're both adults," he said. "And unlike that day three years ago when you recklessly descended on me, I now have something to offer you financially. I'm willing...and able...to give you what you wanted then." His face was unreadable.

"What are you saying?" she said coolly.

"I'm asking you to move in with me."

His tone was so dispassionate she felt as if he'd slapped her. His words acknowledged that the sexual attraction between them was as strong

as ever, even if there was nothing else. "Just like... that?"

"Just like that." His eyes met hers steadily.

"There's... nothing between us now."

An eternity passed before he said softly, "Liar."

He was close, too close, his body almost but not quite touching hers. She was locked between him and the door, and she could feel the heat and warmth of him, see the lazy, sensual droop of his lips. But if she tossed away her misgivings and stayed to take what she wanted, she would have to touch him as he touched her, without love. She would have to look up at those cynical eyes and pretend she was just as cynical. She knew she couldn't do that. He would look at her and know that she still loved him. "I can't stay, Joel."

"Can't? Or won't?"

Her chin came up a little. "Won't."

"Is that a no?" At her nod, he smiled and shrugged.

LATER, WHEN Alison had gone, Joel was left in an apartment that echoed with emptiness. He had everything that money could buy, except the one thing he wanted most. He had tried to buy her, but she wasn't to be bought.

Or was she? His money could put him in her realm. If she wouldn't stay with him, he could go to her....

Mentally he ran through his schedule for the next two weeks. Another two nights at N'yuk N'yuks, a *Tonight Show* appearance, a television game show. Nothing there that couldn't be canceled.

When was that taping for the comedy special? September. By then, he would have been successful with Alison... or suffered the most humiliating defeat of his life.

With a sudden, quick energy, Joel reached for the phone and punched out a number. When a male voice answered, Joel said, "Ted? Listen, I've got to get away for a while. Clear my schedule for a couple of weeks, will you? And find me a club to play up in the Adirondacks. The Saranac Lakes area around Tupper. I want to spend a few weeks in the mountains."

*

APPREHENSION had followed Alison out of New York City to the airport, wound around her like plastic wrap when she'd landed in Syracuse and stuck like glue when she'd climbed into the rental car. Her encounter with Joel hadn't gone at all the way she had expected.

She would be glad to get to the camp and settle in. Eve Cunningham, the director, had assured her that her cabin would be ready when she got there.

Alison reached the turnoff, swung into a curving lane and came out into the clearing where the buildings were clustered. One lone gas lamp illuminated the larger cabin where the dining hall and the classrooms were located. Behind it, close to the woods, stood a ring of smaller cabins. The lake sparkled in the moonlight.

Alison got her suitcase and walked up the steps to the porch. A shaded lamp, suspended by a cord, swung over the kitchen table. Someone had

turned it on...someone who was still inside.

Pottery clattered to the floor, shattering. A curse in a low, masculine voice followed.

Every instinct told Alison to run. But another, cooler part of her brain told her the intruder had to be connected to the camp. She took a breath. "Hello?"

He stepped forward, and fear was swept away by anger and disbelief. How could he possibly be here?

But Joel Brandon was. Not only that, he looked so totally at home that he might have been there for years. He wore a gray sweatshirt that was thigh length—a good thing, since it seemed to be all he had on. Below its tattered, ribbed band was that long length of bare, furred, muscled leg she'd seen that night at the club, ending in a well-shaped bare foot.

"How did you get here ahead of me?" she demanded.

"I flew."

He wasn't a hallucination. Her lips lifted in a rueful smile.

"The others thought you weren't coming tonight, but I knew you wouldn't be able to resist driving straight through so you could get organized before morning."

That little prickle lifted tiny hairs at the back of her neck. He knew her far too well. "Let's try this one more time. How did you get here ahead of me?"

"You stopped in Syracuse to rent a car and drive up 181. I came straight here from New York on a charter flight."

That gave her pause. He had chartered a plane to come here. "The

bigger question is why did you come at all?"

His eyes flickered away. "I wanted to see you. And if Muhammad won't come to the mountain, et cetera."

Alison thought about getting back into her car, but then she remembered her almost empty gas tank. Disturbed by her sexual attraction to him, she said, "Joel, you must have had commitments. Why did you go to all this trouble?"

"Because I'm a nature lover?" he ventured.

Her chin came up. "Nature, Mr. Brandon?"

His smile widened. "Precisely, Ms. Powell. So much so that I've...enrolled in one of your classes."

She felt as if he'd punched her. "You can't mean that."

Tension hung in the air. "Oh, but I do. I have paid my money and registered."

To give herself time to deal with the latest bomb he'd handed her, she turned to look around at the cabin, wondering how to stop this comic juggernaut from taking over her life. "You aren't serious."

"This time I am. And don't try to think of ways to have me kicked out. I got the boss lady's approval."

She kept her head turned away, which had the added advantage of taking Joel out of her vision.

"You must be thirsty after your trip. Can I get you some tea?" he asked, and turned to the kettle bubbling on the stove.

She stood watching that broad back. Along with his physical attributes, broad shoulders, muscular arms, nicely shaped legs, the man

was too perceptive, too sensitive. He was as seductive as a sea breeze. She had to get him out of here.

"Isn't this a little far to go for revenge?"

"What makes you think I came for revenge?"

"Why else would you come?"

"Maybe because I wanted to see you."

"I can't imagine why."

"Try harder," he said softly.

"I...don't want you here."

"That's unfortunate." He folded his arms. "I'm afraid we're stuck here for the night...together. I'm contracted to work a club up here, and I was supposed to occupy a cabin in a group that backs onto yours, owned by the same landlord. They weren't expecting me tonight, either, and my cabin was occupied, so they put me in the only other empty one...yours. We'll have to share."

He set her teacup on the table, asked if she needed sugar. When she shook her head, he turned a chair around and straddled it, so that she could see a dark edge of fabric riding his thigh just under the sweat-shirt ribbing. Under it, he was wearing his swim trunks. She averted her eyes, took a sip of tea.

"Will your cabin be available tomorrow, or is this situation to continue indefinitely?" she asked.

"We won't really know until morning."

With a casualness that she hoped was convincing, Alison said, "I still don't understand what made you decide to leave New York and venture into the mountainous wilds to work."

"Is your non sequitur meant to drag me away from the subject of our spending the night together?"

She gave him a straight look. "Yes."

His smile faded. "I needed a vacation to save my sanity. My agent arranged this for me."

She sipped her tea, felt it reviving her. She could almost believe him. He was in dire need of a rest; she knew that. "I can't stay here with you." She stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"To sleep in my car. I have reclining seats."

"You'll be safe enough there, I guess."

"You guess?"

"I've seen bears put their paws through glass, looking for food in a car. But I'm sure they wouldn't do that to you."

It was a blatant attempt to scare her into staying in the cabin. "I'm going now. Good night, then."

"Good night, Alison." He sounded amused. What had she said that was funny? She went to the screen door, pulled it open and stepped onto the porch.

The trees sighed in a soft movement of air. A gentle, *whuffing* sound reached her ears. An animal, breathing heavily. A big animal. Then she heard, more distinctly, a low growl. Cool, logical sense vanished. Tiny hairs were rising everywhere in preparation for fight or flight, adrenaline pouring into her bloodstream. She knew about bears, knew that mostly you stayed away from them. Telling herself her imagination was working overtime, she took another step. The growl

sounded again... louder and closer. She bolted into the cabin.

Joel was standing with his back to the stove, exactly where he'd been when she'd left him. "Change your mind about staying?" he asked smoothly.

"No. Yes."

"So. Shall we flip a coin to see who sleeps on the couch?"

"I'll take the couch."

"I hope you don't expect me to be a gentleman and refuse."

"I don't expect anything from you, except the directions to the bathroom."

"You didn't... hear anything out there, did you?" Had he heard the sound, too? Now she knew that nothing on this earth would make her venture out into the dark again.

"Would you feel safer if I locked the door?"

"Yes. Yes, I would."

He latched the inside door and when he swiveled to face her, he looked... unconcerned. "The bathroom's through that door. If there's anything else you need, you will let me know, won't you?"

He was as silky as a cat and as intelligent. Did he mean exactly what he said... or something subtler?

THE WATER next morning was as crisp and cool as a mountain stream, a degree or two under sixty, just the way she liked it, good for hard swimming. After doing what she guessed was thirty laps, Alison hoisted herself up on the dock and shivering a little, stretched out on the beach towel she'd brought with her, preparing to enjoy the slight toasting she meant to give her skin.

She started to close her eyes and couldn't. There was too much of Joel Brandon's flesh in view. Acres of it, stretched over the taut muscle and well-sculpted bones of his legs and arms. He stood on the dock as if he owned it, his neatly turned thigh and furred chest worthy of a *Play-girl* centerfold. Only his black bikini trunks kept him from rating a luscious X.

Something wrenched deep inside Alison, heat within her spiraling upward. He was...spectacular, smoother and sleeker and with more dark hair curling on his chest and thighs than she'd remembered.

"Hi. Fancy meeting you here."

Funny, Alison thought, *he seems self-conscious*. "Hello, Joel."

She was wearing an electric-blue maillot cut high on the hips. It wasn't as revealing as a bikini, but it was flattering to her skin and coloring. Was he looking down at her, taking in the lightly tanned length of her leg? She didn't know. She didn't want to know.

He cleared his throat. "Guess I'll go for a swim."

"The water's a little cold, not fit for city folk. I'd give it another day or two, if I were you."

"You went in, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I'm used to swimming in cool water."

"It can't be that bad." He arched his arms over his head and dived cleanly into the sparkling blue water.

Under the water, Joel froze with shock. It was like jumping naked into the Arctic Sea. He surfaced, wiping the water out of his eyes. The shock of the cold had him gasping

for breath. He should have listened to her.

Alison was lying on her back with her arm over her eyes. Thankful she wasn't watching him shiver, he snatched up his towel and swathed his shoulders in it.

"Enjoy your swim?" Alison's voice was silky.

With great effort he controlled the chattering of his teeth long enough to say, "Yes, very much."

"Well, Alison. I see you found us." Eve Cunningham stood at the edge of the dock, smiling.

Tall, wearing a preppy T-shirt with alligator motif, a denim skirt and a flowered hat that looked like a Katharine Hepburn reject, Eve glanced appreciatively at Joel for a second, then back at Alison. "Gorgeous morning, isn't it?" The gleam in her eyes told Alison she wasn't talking about the weather. "Joel told me you arrived late but slept well."

"Yes."

"Good. When we start with the kids tomorrow, you'll need that reserve of energy. Take care, Joel."

"You too, Eve."

"Nice lady," he murmured as Eve disappeared through the trees.

"Hadn't you better get back to the cabin and take a shower to warm up? Then you'll have to pack."

"Yes, I will, won't I?" He reached out and drew a fingertip down her cool cheek, his eyes on her face.

"Please don't...do that." Her nerves quivered with reaction.

"Don't do what, Alison?"

"Touch me as if it were your right."

He let his hand drop. "Once upon a time it was."

She lifted her chin. "Once upon a time belongs in stories."

"And there's no room in your world for make-believe . . . or me." His tone was light, casual. He turned his back to her and walked off the dock and up the path. She stood watching him go, hurting in some vague way that she couldn't describe.

Joel turned off the water, rubbed himself down with a towel and donned jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt. The shower had made him restless and edgy. He began to collect his shaving things, his razor and shaving cream, throwing them into the duffel bag by his feet. He hated packing.

Alison stood at the door, watching. She'd seen Joel pack more than once and knew he wasn't very organized, but that mess in his bag was bad, even for him. "Will you have a place to stay by now?"

"Yes." He met her eyes. "It's just a short hike down the road from here."

Too close, Alison thought. Much too close.

He kept on with what he was doing, scooping up a pair of heavy white socks and tossing them in the bag. He pulled the zipper shut. Feeling strangely helpless, Alison remained at the door. "Joel, I—" She stopped, finally fell back on a polite phrase. "If there's anything you need—"

"Don't worry about me."

"It was a polite offer, nothing more."

"Then there is something you can do for me. Stop making polite offers." He picked up the duffel bag and walked past her, then in a light tone that told her nothing of what he was feeling, he said, "Watch out for bears and wolves, won't you?"

*

ALISON HAD always admired courage, believed every woman needed it, every day. The trouble was, believing in it and having it were two different things.

All morning she worked diligently, trying to concentrate on her first class of charming little cherubs, knowing that at 1:00 p.m. she would be facing the afternoon group that included Joel Brandon. That was when she would need to summon every bit of courage.

She'd known the pitfalls in trying to deal with a group of kids outside four walls and a schedule, but she'd told herself she could handle them. She hadn't counted on Joel Brandon's being a member of her class. And then, there was Marty.

Alison noticed him right away. Troublemakers had that knack of standing out in the crowd. While the rest gathered around her, he slouched like a miniature movie gangster on the periphery of the group, isolating himself. From the crown of his carrot head down to his high-top Nikes, he flashed like a neon light, every move he made filled with defiance. He was a kid who'd grown up too fast and knew too much. And to top it all off, he was far more interested in Joel Brandon than he was in science. The others had accepted Alison's casual

statement that while on vacation Joel was filling in some gaps in his education. Marty was the only one who recognized Joel and tried to be near him.

She was used to teaching teenagers in Iowa, where she knew everybody and had since they were little. She knew their parents, their cousins, their uncles, their aunts. Here she was at a disadvantage. She knew nothing about Marty Shorter apart from the fact that he obviously resented being at the camp.

But Alison treated him with the same friendly, no-nonsense casualness with which she treated all the others.

She had planned to start the group off with a nature walk and a short course in tree identification. As she started along the trail, one by one they straggled after her. At a scrubby hornbeam she stopped, said its name and told them that the tree's only real value was as shelter for small animals.

"That's a funny name, corn-beam," said Marty.

"Hornbeam," she corrected. Marty's grin told her she had fallen into the trap. Another boy giggled.

That set the tone for the whole walk. Everything was a big joke from then on. Halfway along the trail, Joel fell into step beside her. "Does it bother you that they're making jokes?"

"The educational value of the hike has dropped off sharply."

"Not necessarily. Research shows that people remember things better if an emotional jolt is delivered with the information, like laughter or tears."

Alison countered, "Only if the emotion and the information are related in some way."

"Humor adds to our intelligence. It gives us a new way to see things."

"I have nothing against humor. In the proper place, it's a catharsis—"

"You make it sound like a laxative."

She turned on him, and in a low, furious tone, she said, "That's exactly what I mean. I try to explain how I see something and you make a joke out of it."

He stood staring back at her. "Maybe I'm just trying to get you to stop taking yourself so seriously."

Whatever she might have replied was lost in the sound of splashing and Alison whirled away from Joel to scan the lake. Marty was there, wading into the water, pushing ahead of him an old canoe.

Alison cried out to him to stop, but he ignored her and scrambled over the side, using his arm as a paddle to propel the boat away from shore.

She took off after him, Joel beside her, running as fast as she. But at the shoreline, just as she was ready to make a shallow surface dive, Joel caught her arm.

"Let him go. With a little luck, maybe he'll drown."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the canoe began to gurggle like a fountain. Marty let out a yell, but still Joel held Alison's arm. "Let him swim. The dunking will cool him off."

Marty's defiance turned into frenzy. Out of the jumble of words, Alison caught two: "Can't swim."

Panic flared and she twisted out of Joel's hand, kicked off her sneakers, took a breath and hit the shallow water flat with a gliding stroke that sent her halfway to the boat. A splash told her Joel had entered the water too.

Joel surged ahead of her and reached the boy first. He plucked him out of the water by his shirt collar. Panicked, Marty wrapped his arms around Joel's neck in a stranglehold and pushed him under. Afraid for Joel as much as for Marty, Alison cried out and swam to the tangle of thrashing arms and legs, yanking one of Marty's arms away from Joel's neck.

As suddenly as it began, it was over. All three of them stood in the chest-high water and stared at one another. Marty resembled a soaked, water-hating cat.

"Had enough of the briny deep for one day, Captain Hornblower?" Joel asked Marty and cocked an eyebrow at Alison. "What do you think, matey? Would you say the chap hasn't collected his sea legs yet?" Joel clasped Marty's arm and escorted him to shore. "The next time you try a dumb stunt like that, I'll let you drown," he told him.

"How was I to know that old tub wouldn't float?"

"You're right. Anyone with half a brain would know better than to take an old cast-off boat out onto the lake, but you don't have a half, do you?"

The boy flushed under Joel's cutting words. "Big man. Big deal. You can't be too smart yourself, or you wouldn't be in a class with a bunch of dumb kids."

"Got a nickel?" Joel asked easily. When Marty nodded, Joel said, "Give it to me."

"Why should I?" Marty replied.

"Do it and find out why."

Marty stood still, then thrust his hand in his soaked pocket and drew out the coin. He slapped it in Joel's outstretched palm. "Now what?"

"I'm going to give you a piece of advice, and I knew you'd value it more if you had to pay for it." Marty scowled. Joel went on. "The spoken word is a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways. You use it to whack away at other people, and they'll grab it out of your hand and impale you with it. Remember that." And flipping the nickel in the air with his thumb and forefinger, Joel walked away.

THAT EVENING, when the sun had turned the world mellow and the birds were quiet in the pines, Alison went to see Eve Cunningham.

Eve's cabin was cool and comfortable with old knotty-pine furniture. "It matches me," Eve said dryly, pouring a generous portion of rosé into a grayish-brown mug. She poked the mug at Alison, nodding at the battered cup. "Everything up here matches me. Antediluvian. That's why I feel so at home. Drink up. I never indulge in my vices alone." Eve's face had the look of a woman who worshiped the sun instead of smooth skin. Perhaps that was why Alison liked her. She had her own brand of courage. It shone from her wise green eyes.

"Classes go okay?" Eve sipped and smiled. "Or did you come to tell me about Marty?"

"I'm not sure whether I came for confession or commiseration."

"A little of both, probably." Eve had the look of a woman who had seen too much of life to let any part of it shock her. "I've already heard a couple of versions of this afternoon's event. Why don't you tell me yours?"

Unable to look into the other woman's kind, nonjudgmental face, Alison's eyes dropped. "The boy might have drowned."

"I don't think so. He has the survival instinct of a cat. Remember that the next time you're tempted to feel sorry for him." Eve paused. "Was it Marty's defiant runaway act that bothered you... or Joel's rescuing him?"

Alison raised her chin. "I want to know about Marty."

Eve smiled. "Marty isn't any different from many other kids in this country. When he was twelve, his parents were divorced and his mother remarried. He couldn't accept it. To complicate things, his best friend was killed in a plane crash. He's been angry at the world ever since. His mother has tried to buy the world back for him, but he doesn't want it. He's far too intelligent for his own good. And talented."

"Talented?"

"He sings, dances, acts—you name it. He inherited his ability to dance from his father, and wants to go into the theater. His mother wants him to be a scientist."

"I see."

"Do you?" Eve sighed. "Every year his mother sends him up here thinking we can accomplish what she

can't. And every year Marty does his darnedest to show her there's no hope. Meanwhile, he's become a permanent fixture at the camp. The season isn't officially open till we've had our first Marty escapade."

Alison's mouth curved in a smile. "I don't remember him being listed in that glossy brochure you sent me."

Eve flashed another of those half-wise, half-devilish smiles of hers. "I'm smarter than that."

"HEY! What the devil do you think you're doing here?" Joel caught the arm of the redheaded kid who lounged in the shadows and trundled him toward the entrance of the dining room next door. The minimum age for admittance to the Pine Tree Lounge was twenty-one, and Joel knew the kid he'd fished from the water that afternoon wasn't even close.

Aware of a few heads turning his way, Joel mumbled a word under his breath and hoped no one would accuse him of child abuse. He thought of some choice forms for this specimen, particularly the one that involved turning the kid bottom up over his knee and placing a few well-aimed blows on that skinny rear end.

"Hey." The kid's loud-voice protest brought them more attention. "You're mussing the suit, man." He made an elaborate pretense of pulling his T-shirt away.

"I'll muss more than the suit if you don't come along quietly."

"I came to hear Joel Brandon, the world-famous comedian. I thought you were working here. Instead you're at the bar downing a beer and

bouncing innocent kids in your spare time—”

“In *their* spare time innocent kids don’t frequent bars. Where in the hell are your parents?”

The boy stared at Joel. “They went to a movie.”

“So you took a hike.”

A closed, blank look shuttered the boy’s eyes. “They’ll never know the difference.”

“Where do you live?”

Joel could see the boy think about lying but discard the idea. “In Elmira. But right now the entire family is playing cozy campers at a trailer on Fish Creek.”

Joel could imagine how cozy it was with Elmira’s version of James Dean in residence. “So they left you alone. Maybe, even at your age, you don’t like to be alone.”

Marty’s eyes went hot with resentment at Joel’s perceptive comment. Tiring of the game, Joel said, “Come on. I’ll take you back to the campsite.”

“Don’t bother. I can hitch back.”

“Not while I have something to say about it.” Joel’s jaw developed a hard slant.

They made it through the dining room, but in the entryway, Marty halted and shot Joel a straight, adult look. “You can’t baby-sit me. Aren’t you due to go on soon?”

Marty’s rare excursion into thinking about someone else caught Joel by surprise. “My schedule’s flexible. Come on. My car’s off to the side.”

On the winding highway to Fish Creek, Joel let the silence in the car build.

Marty squirmed restlessly in his seat. “Turn on the radio, will you?”

“No,” said Joel.

As if he were in shock, Marty subsided into silence. Hadn’t anyone ever told him no before?

“For a stand-up comedian, you don’t have much small talk.” When Joel didn’t reply, Marty turned and stared out the windshield. “You gotta have small talk, man, or you don’t make it with the chicks these days.”

Despite himself, Joel responded. “Aren’t you a little young to be worrying about ‘making it’ with ‘chicks’?”

“Naw. I get around.”

Bravado. Sheer bravado. At least, Joel hoped it was.

“How’s your love life these days? You making it with the teach?”

Joel turned into the entrance of Fish Creek State Park, thinking it hadn’t come a minute too soon. Was this what Alison dealt with every day of the school year, kids who were rude and self-centered and quick with personal comments? He’d always admired her dedication, but never so much as now.

“I’m returning this boy to his family’s campsite,” Joel explained to the ranger.

The woman asked, “What number?”

Marty said, “Thirty-four.”

“Turn right and follow the road.”

“Thank you.” Joel nodded to the woman.

The only light on in the campsite was a small kerosene lantern on the ground a few feet away from the trailer. The parents had gone and left

a kid, one who couldn't swim, alone at a campsite near water.

Something deep and wrenching twisted inside Joel. "Have you got a key to the trailer?"

"Sure." He pulled a chain from the inside of his shirt. He looked like a waif, a spitting, arch-backed kitten who'd been dumped by the wayside. Echoes from the past washed over Joel in disturbing waves.

"Hey, funny man. You never answered my question about your love life."

Joel cast his eyes over Marty's placid face. "No, I didn't, because you never asked it. Now if you're finished with your obnoxious act, get out of the car."

"It's no act. This is the real me you're seeing."

"Good night, Marty." Joel's voice was soft, lethal.

"Can't wait to get rid of me, can you?" Marty climbed out, slammed the door shut and leaned in the window. "Well, it looks like this is goodbye. Thanks for the ride. Sorry I didn't get to hear your routine tonight. I've seen you on TV. You're not too bad."

"Thanks. I think." Had Marty seen him looking at the campsite and its lone light? Had he been purposely rude to curb any tendency Joel had toward pity? At sixteen, that would have been Joel's own reaction exactly.

"Take it easy, kid," he said, and Marty stepped away from the car. Headlights flashed over the boy as Joel turned and drove away.

THE SECOND weekend dragged by endlessly. The thunderstorm that

should have come days before broke at last, darkening the skies. Thunder racketed in the mountains, the sound and fury matching Alison's mood. On Sunday evening, when the sky finally cleared and the temperature warmed up again, she slipped into her swimsuit and ran down to the lake. As she dived into the cold water, shock sizzled through her, but she surfaced and began to swim, determined to stay in the water. She needed the outlet of physical exercise.

Half an hour of steady swimming in the chilled water began to work its magic. Her mind nearly as numb as her body, she crawled onto the dock and wrapped herself in her voluminous towel.

The twilight enclosed her, softened the edges of the dock, turned the trees into a dark veil. The darkness at the crest of the hill took on form, became Joel. Light-colored chinos clung to his thighs. A knit shirt covered his muscular chest.

At the edge of the dock, he stopped. Heavy lashes hid the expression in his golden-brown eyes.

"Were you...looking for me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Was there something you wanted to say to me?"

"Yes. Has anything changed between us, Alison?"

Her heart cried out the answer. Nothing had changed. She loved him, but he didn't love her. "No."

"So I'm wasting my time up here."

"So it would seem. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm getting chilled. I need to go and change."

In that soft, gray light, he stood between her and dry land, unmoving. Then she took a step toward him. Instinctively, he moved onto the dock and squarely into her path.

The dock joggled with his weight and shuddered under Alison's bare feet.

"Joel..." She didn't know what she'd been about to say, but it didn't matter, for the words died in her throat. He reached out and caught the edges of the towel above her breasts, using it to draw her close.

"You're giving me conflicting signals, sweet. You say no and then you come closer. We were good together once. We can be again."

"No."

His smile mocked her denial. "Yes, Alison." He tugged the towel from her hands, and let it fall at her ankles. She shivered and he instantly wrapped her in his arms. She couldn't move. "Please...don't..."

Each word fell on Joel's ears like balm. Every syllable was a lovely, aching lie. He folded her wet body into his arms and bent his head to claim his prize.

Her mouth was hot, an exciting contrast to her cool arms and shoulders. She smelled of water and the night, and he wanted to take her inside him, absorb her. The fiery, sweet taste of her mouth made him want more. He flattened his palm against her sleek, damp hip and pressed her closer, letting her feel the thrust of his body against hers.

She tensed momentarily, but his tongue curled out, wooing her with teasing passes at her lips. His other hand slid up to her nape, tangling in her hair.

His heat surrounded Alison in a protective male warmth that was as seductive as satin sheets. She wanted to lie down, there on the dock, and have him lie with her.... "Please don't do this—"

His mouth caught the husky, halfhearted protest and turned it to his advantage, tasting, savoring the tiny opening with a playful thrust of his tongue that was withdrawn before she had time to respond.

Warm and smooth his mouth was, like cream. Against her softness he was hard strength, long, sheathed muscles finding their place in preparation for loving. His fingers teased down her bare spine; a thigh nudged between hers.

"Joel—"

He wrapped his other leg behind her, trapping her, and threaded his hands deeper into her hair. Freed of all restraint, it poured over his fingers. He murmured, "Alison, take a chance. Step off the end of the world with me. Be brave." Smiling, he fit his lips to hers once more.

She leaned back, taking her mouth from his. "Being brave is one thing. Being foolhardy is another."

He laughed, as she had known he would. Thinking she'd distracted him, she relaxed, only to have his mouth boldly recapture what he'd lost. With hands and arms he cradled and comforted her even while he aroused her. He teased her with his tongue, retreating slightly and then advancing with more boldness to delve more deeply. He touched her tongue, flicking at it. With all the velvet delight of her mouth given willingly into his possession, he was

free to woo her in whatever way he chose.

Deliberately he deepened the rhythm, until he was kissing her in the most erotic way a man can kiss a woman.

She was feminine and beautiful and yielding, and he knew that if he didn't draw away soon, he would confirm her conviction that he was a man who needed sexual satisfaction from her and nothing more. Her lips were swollen, her eyes dark and aroused. "You're a quick study, Alison. But as I recall . . . you always were." His drawl conjured up nights when she'd run to him eagerly and mornings when she'd awakened in his arms. "Come back to my cabin with me."

She wanted to go; she ached to go. But a cooler, saner voice said, *He rejected you once, and you put yourself back together. Could you do it again?*

She lifted her head. "No, Joel," she said steadily.

"Cautious, clever Alison. Why is it that when I'm kissing you I forget you have that cautious streak?"

Leaving her to stare after him in the gathering darkness, he turned and walked away. The dock vibrated from the shock of his going. And so did she.

*

A LOON frantically beat its wings to keep its heavy body tilted in an intolerable position, suspended between air and water, then tipped its rear down to splash to a landing on the lake. Alison's class elbowed one another, jockeying for position along the dock for a clear view.

"Look, he sees us," a girl said excitedly. "He's not afraid. He's coming closer."

"Maybe he's taking a class on humans," drawled Marty.

After two weeks of classes, group dynamics had taken over. The others had picked friends, but Marty remained the odd man out. Joel was the only one to whom Marty had formed an attachment.

"What would anyone like to know about the loon?" This was her new approach, her attempt to elicit curiosity from her students.

To her surprise and pleasure, questions flew at her fast and furiously. Was a loon a duck? Where did it live and what did it eat?

Casually, as if he didn't really care about the answer, Marty asked, "Why is he out there all alone? Are loons loners?"

Alison glanced at him to see if he was up to his usual tricks, but the boy was sitting staring out over the water at the bird, his face serious. He felt a kinship with that solitary loon. Over the boy's head, Alison's eyes met Joel's. "That's an excellent observation, Marty," she said. "In the spring and summer, loons *are* loners. They feed alone or with their mates. In the winter, though, they congregate in flocks."

It had been a good session, and Alison was reluctant to see it end. But as if the hour of intense concentration had never been, they exploded into life and scrambled to their feet. In the confined area of the dock, Ted stumbled against Tom who whirled to deliver retribution and accidentally caught Kathryn in the side with his elbow. She lost her bal-

ance and toppled off the dock, landing with a splash in the water.

After that, everything was a blur. Marty's face, rosy with fury, flashed into Alison's vision. He called Tom a name, slung a fist in the general direction of the boy's middle and then jumped into the water. "Let him go," Joel said.

"But he can't swim!"

"Kathryn can. And she seems to know lifesaving."

Relieved, Alison watched Kathryn tug Marty to the dock. Joel extended a hand and none too gently hauled him over the side to sit on the dock. Kathryn followed, her dark-black hair and shorts dripping, her blouse clinging to her young breasts.

"Why on earth did you jump in after her when you can't swim?" Alison asked.

Marty had the sense to look foolish. "I didn't want her to be alone."

Alison opened her mouth, but Joel's hand cautioned her. He was looking at Kathryn.

Gracefully she leaned over and held out her hand to help Marty up. Apparently in a daze, he took it. She brought him to his feet. "It was nice of you to worry about me, Marty."

"No problem."

Alison looked at the two of them. Jeans, sneakers, T-shirts were sodden. "I can't let you go home on the bus like this—"

"I'll take them home." Joel stepped forward. "Come on, ace. I already know where you hang out."

"We've moved. We're on Rollins Pond." Marty's voice was tight.

"That's where my family is now, too." Kathryn smiled.

"Fine," Joel drawled. "I'll run my own private bus."

"Wait," Alison said. "I'd better come and explain to their parents what happened. Let me get some towels." She looked at the two teenagers. "Go with Joel. And stay away from the water."

"YOUR BACK SEAT is going to be damp for a while."

"It's a rental car. Let the company worry about it."

They had dropped the teenagers and were on their way back. Marty's parents hadn't been at the family site, but Kathryn's had.

Alison lay back on the headrest, thinking this had been a long day.

She must have dozed, for it seemed like only an instant later when Joel pulled up in front of her cabin. She didn't want him to go. "Would you like to come in?"

"For what?" He met her gaze head-on, boldly.

"For coffee. For supper. For talk."

His lean fingers caressed her skin, his eyes mocking her offer. "I don't want coffee or supper or talk."

Her body reacted to the dark invitation in his eyes, her breasts lifting and swelling against her cotton shirt. He drew his finger down her cheek, his smile headily intimate. "I thank you for your kind offer, but I have other plans."

"I thought you had Monday evenings off."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "I do."

"I...see." She had no right to ask Joel what he was doing.

"Do you? I doubt it."

As she murmured goodbye, she was still wondering what she'd said to displease him.

Thinking of how she'd looked, Joel drove too fast down the curving road. She thought he was going to see another woman. It had been written all over her face.

When he pulled up at the campsite, where only an hour before he'd dropped Marty, his mood was not good. But he prepared himself to speak to Marty's mother.

Luckily for his state of mind, she was receptive to his plan. Joel asked where the boy was then and was directed to a clearing across the road. He strode into the pines to find Marty sitting on the stump of a tree. At the snap of a twig under Joel's foot, Marty jumped. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. It's time you learned to swim."

Marty swore.

"Not here. We'll go to the beach at Fish Creek."

Marty's eyes widened slightly at Joel's sensitivity. He wouldn't have to make a fool of himself in full view of his stepfather. "I'm not going. My mother—"

"I've already spoken to your mother."

ALISON STOOD in the darkening shadows of the birch trees, watching the man work patiently with the boy. She saw Joel shake his head, tow Marty into shallow water, heard him say, "Try it again. Come on now."

You're not playing fair, Joel Brandon. It's not fair to make me feel like this, not fair to take my

heart and wring it with your caring for this kid.

She hadn't meant to spy on him. After she'd eaten her evening meal, she'd driven to Marty's campsite to talk to his mother, only to discover that he had been whisked away by Joel for a swimming lesson.

Joel Brandon had the capacity for love; he just didn't know it. And concealing herself, watching him, Alison discovered that her capacity for loving *him* was a million times greater than she'd ever dreamed.

Purple clouds drifted across the sky. The sun was dropping, and so was the temperature. Now man and boy stood in the waist-high water. Joel gestured toward the shore, but Marty was shaking his head. Joel turned his back on the boy and began to splash toward the shore. But Marty turned and lunged into a clumsy swimmer's crawl, heading straight for deep water.

"No," Alison whispered, proud of the boy's courage yet afraid he was getting in too deep and that Joel wouldn't see him until it was too late. She was just ready to cry out to Joel, when he turned, saw what was happening and did a swift, shallow dive that took him to the boy's side. Like a shark picking up its prey, Joel whipped the boy around and hauled him to his feet in the shallower water. Joel stumbled onto the beach with Marty in tow.

Alison shrank back into the shadow of the trees, not wanting to break the intimacy between man and boy. Neither looked her way. When they'd climbed into Joel's car and gone, Alison turned and walked through the darkening night to her

own car, her heart filled with an overwhelming tenderness.

THE NIGHT RUSTLED and sighed around her as she walked down the path to Joel's cabin. She'd exchanged her sneakers for sandals, and fallen needles crunched underfoot.

The sound didn't match the rise and fall of her own feet. Someone... or something... was coming down the path toward her.

Alison's heart leaped into her throat. A vision of a bear danced before her eyes. She began to run, but she was being chased.

"What in the devil are you doing, training for the Olympics?"

Angry, frightened, embarrassed, she whirled on the dark figure: Joel. "What are you doing out here?"

Silence followed, then Joel's voice. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was coming to... see you—to talk to you," she added.

In the darkness, his hair looked black, his face smooth. Suddenly he bent toward her, breathed in deeply. "For a woman who's only coming to talk, you certainly were lavish with scent."

"I dropped the perfume bottle." Nodding, she said, "You seem to have brought your bottle along."

"I was coming to offer you a goodbye drink."

"Goodbye?"

"Yes. And in fond farewell, bon voyage, et cetera."

"I see."

He was silent for a moment, then he gestured with the bottle. "Well, which way? Yours or mine?"

"It's closer to mine."

"Yours it is, then."

He dropped behind to follow her along the narrow path, still behind her when they climbed the cabin steps. She pulled open the door and held it for him.

"Please. Make yourself at home." She gestured at the table. "I'll get glasses."

Joel poured a small amount for Alison and a more generous shot into his glass. She sank into the chair across from him, tucking her legs to one side to avoid his long ones, picking up her glass. With the air of Socrates swallowing hemlock, she drank. It was brandy, and the heady liquor burned all the way down her throat.

"I suggest you go a little easy on that stuff. As I remember, you're not a heavy drinker."

She set down the glass. "Perhaps your memory is faulty."

His eyes caught hers, held. "Not likely. I remember most things very well. You said you wanted to talk to me."

"What I had to say isn't important now." Unable to go on looking at him, she broke eye contact. She was terribly afraid that he was leaving because that was what he really wanted to do.

"What about Marty? Are you just going to walk off and leave him—" She nearly said, "too."

"Marty's a survivor. He'll live."

"I saw you with him tonight at the beach. For a man who's... rarely taught anyone anything before, you were very good with him."

"Thank you. You were watching the whole time?"

"Most of it."

"May I ask where you were?"

"You may. I was hiding. Behind a tree."

"Then you must have seen me turn my back on him and nearly let him drown."

"One of the first lessons a teacher learns. Never turn your back on your students."

"I'll remember that." He drained his glass. "It's not often a man gets to drown his sorrows in the company of the woman who drove him to drink." He rose and bowed. "Thank you for your forbearance. Now I think it's time for me to go."

She took a breath and gathered all her courage. "I wasn't going to ask you to leave, Joel. I was going to ask you if you still . . . wanted me."

He stood very still. "I've never stopped wanting you." He waited. "Don't lose your courage now, sweet."

"Would you like to . . . stay?"

Joel put a hand on the chair he'd just vacated. "I'd like that very much. Are you sure that's what you want?" A lifted eyebrow punctuated the husky question.

"Yes," she said, too quickly.

He gazed at her. "I don't think it is. I don't understand why you've changed your mind."

"You don't have to understand me. You don't have to understand anything about me. Just . . . go." She stood and collected their tumblers, moving away to put them in the sink. She kept her back to him.

His warm hands slid around her middle, and she was brought back against him. A relief such as she had never known flooded every cell in her body.

"Alison."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, felt the strength of his chest against her back, the caress of his breath on her neck. There was everything she hoped for in that husky whisper of her name, a plea for forgiveness, a wealth of longing.

She covered the hands that were clasped in front of her with her own and told him with her touch that no forgiveness was needed. "My seduction technique leaves something to be desired, I know, but it's the best I could do on the spur of the moment."

"Your best is too damn good." He stood inhaling the scent of her silky hair, feeling the slimness of her waist under his hands. Her breathing had accelerated slightly, and he knew his had, too. That delicious sense of anticipation just before he went taut with desire rippled through him.

Alison exhaled softly, a sigh of contentment and passion; his anticipation burgeoned into full-blown readiness. He slipped his hands from beneath hers and brushed the taut underside of her breasts with his knuckles. She breathed in sharply and trembled.

Just as he was going to turn her, she twisted in his arms and faced him, slipping her hands around his waist to bring him close once more. The lovely weight of her breasts pressed against his chest, and the cradle of her hips fit his with erotic precision. The fullness tightened. "Sweetheart, about the alleged inadequacy of your seduction technique . . ."

She slid her hands under his sweatshirt and found the delicate

nubs of his nipples. He inhaled abruptly.

Once, long ago, she'd learned about a man's body from him. With patience and humor he'd shown her exactly how and where to touch him. He'd done it in such a way that she had felt neither naive nor stupid. Now she added refinements to his instruction, as groaning, he set about exacting his retribution. His lean fingers unfastened her wispy bra, pushed it aside to seek the warm, rounded flesh.

Alison had forgotten how insidious his touch could be, how gentle one moment and playful the next. She'd forgotten the way her breasts developed a sleek fluidity in his hands. "Joel..."

Her body heavy with languor, she arched to make her breasts more accessible to his lovely torture. He took advantage of her bared throat to fit his mouth to the vulnerable hollow, exploring it with great thoroughness.

Joel was driven. He wanted to wipe away her uncertainty, bring her such pleasure that whatever the aftermath of their loving, she would have no regrets. He sought and found her mouth, and then looked down into her dark, desire-hazed eyes. His must have been filled with the same deep hunger. Without a word, she grasped the bottom of her shirt to lift it over her head and gracefully shrug away her bra.

Her smooth, golden shoulders gleamed in the lamplight, and her breasts swelled, the peaks rosy and lifted. Joel felt her hands lifting his shirt from his body.

They stood gazing at each other, just outside the ring of light that the lamp cast over the table. Then, his willpower collapsing, he emitted a low, throaty groan and swept her off her feet to carry her to the bed.

In one smooth motion, he reached for her hips in that warm nest of covers, divested her of her remaining clothes, then stood to take off his.

His eyes never left her face as he lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. He bent his head and buried his mouth in the soft skin of her neck.

"If you hadn't been wearing this perfume I might have walked out that door. It was the only thing that gave me some hope that you really planned to come to me."

"I'll write the Arpège people a thank-you note."

"Will you?" He lifted away from her and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure you won't regret this?"

She wanted to make a quip, but the look in his eyes told her he was serious. "No, Joel, I won't regret this."

When he looked as if he was going to say something else, she dropped her head to his chest, exploring the hair-crisp flesh with great concentration. When he reached for her, she shook her head. "No. I want you to lie back and let me... love you."

Something flickered in his eyes at the word, but he did as she asked. She took time and care with his body, lingering here, sculpting there. Slowly, tenderly, her eyes on his, she brushed down the path of dark curling hair that led to his abdomen.

When she closed her hand around him, his eyes seemed to smolder. "Not inadequate at all," he muttered as she stroked the velvet softness of him, and his teeth clamped down on his lip while he fought for control.

This was not what Joel had expected. He hadn't expected her to make love to him with such feminine assurance and maturity. In the three years since he'd been with her, she'd changed. She was quintessential woman, exulting in her power over him. Her strength only made him feel more masculine, more alive, more real. The world was a heady place, a place of vivid colors and intense joy that Alison poured over him with such ease, she was driving him out of his mind....

He grasped her hand and brought her astride him, her thighs an exquisite pleasure enclosing his. Yet he knew he must deny himself the ultimate ecstasy for a few moments longer. It was past time to return the pleasure she'd given him. He found her silky, feminine treasure and stroked it gently, enjoying her instant moan of satisfaction. He made love to her with the deep sense of completeness that comes from pleasure received and given. He loved everything about her. The way her hair fell like roseate gold over her breasts. The way her hips lifted over him in age-old impatience. And the way her body covered his in the ultimate embrace.

His body slid easily into hers; he belonged to her and she to him. He began to move, and she cried out, bending over him to seek his mouth with hers. Soon, too soon, they

erupted into molten heat too powerful to be denied any longer....

JOEL STOOD against the wall in the dining hall the next afternoon, listening to the rain beating on the roof while he watched Alison teach her class indoors. And he faced the brutal truth. What had started as an amusing interlude had become something far more serious. He had thought he could touch her and leave his heart untouched. He'd been wrong. She had become too important to him. The final irony was that in the end, he was the one who would suffer more. He could never make her his.

Knowing she was out of his reach, he had never wanted her more than he did at that moment. She wore her standard working clothes, shorts and a shirt, but he couldn't take his eyes off her flushed face, her sparkling eyes, her flying red-gold hair.

She had forgotten he existed. She was caught up in playing Bombardment, a cross between scientific Trivial Pursuit and a snowball war. Questions were asked, and the team who failed to answer correctly was "bombarded" with crumpled newspaper balls like snowballs. The purpose of the game, it seemed to him, was to set everybody in the room screaming and jumping up and down. The noise and confusion faded from Joel's sight. His vision turned inward, to the events of the night before, and he remembered....

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"ARE THOSE dark circles under your eyes cause for celebration or commiseration?" Eve Cunningham settled more deeply into her flowery chair.

Alison's smile was rueful. She should have known Eve would guess that she and Joel had become lovers. "I'm not sure."

Eve shrugged. "To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of an evening of your company?"

Alison flushed. "I've been neglecting you, haven't I?"

"Actually, I've been neglecting you. I did drop in that day you held class in the dining hall, but you were too busy to notice."

"Did you think you'd stepped into World War Three?"

"I thought I was watching one of the most successful classes I've ever seen in my long years at this camp."

"Thank you." Pleased that Eve approved, Alison sipped her rosé. The sweet-tart taste lingered in her mouth.

"So. That's out of the way. Have you thought any more about returning next year?"

"I'm not sure I want to commit myself until I know what I'm going to be doing this fall."

"So Joel hasn't come to his senses yet."

Alison put down her mug and walked to the window. June had become July almost while she wasn't looking. "Maybe he has. Maybe I'm the one who's crazy."

Eve came to stand behind her, her arm going around Alison's shoulders. "From what I've seen of Joel,

he's worth any effort it takes to make him see what he has in you."

"I've tried almost everything. There's not much left."

"Try loving him without worrying about the future or thinking about your pride. He'll come around."

Alison turned to Eve and saw the love and concern in her face. "I wish I could be as sure of that as you are."

HE'LL COME AROUND. *Easy for you to say, Eve Cunningham.* Alison cut through the cool lake, eating up the distance with a slow, steady crawl. It was Friday afternoon, and her stint at the camp was nearly at an end. Only one more day, and that was to be an activity day that Eve was planning for the students and all the parents who were able to attend. Races, swimming, sailing and a campfire in the evening were planned.

Since that morning Alison had been struggling not to give in to a blue mood. Joel hadn't come to her last night, though she'd waited with the light on in her cabin till well past the hour when he was finished at the club.

But one missed night did not the end of an affair make, she thought.

Back at the cabin, she took a hot shower and towed herself dry. Dressed in her denim pants and a sweater, she settled down to read the letter from her sister Diana that had been waiting for her when she'd come in.

So how is my scientific sister doing in the wilds of the Adirondacks?

Things are fine here. You're lucky you missed out on the haying. The baler broke down, and Dad broke a tooth biting his tongue to keep from saying what he wanted to say because I was sitting there on the tractor listening. Are you coming home Sunday or not? Dad asked me, and I lied and told him I didn't know for sure. Then I realized I really didn't know for sure. If you want us to meet the plane, you'll have to give us a call the night before. You know how long it takes to get to Des Moines.

Your friend David called and wanted to know when you were coming home. How *can* you encourage that creep? He's so thin he makes a scarecrow look tasty. You were certainly reticent about your trip to New York City. Did you see the luscious Joel Brandon?

Guilt washed over Alison in waves. In her letters home, she hadn't mentioned Joel's presence in the mountains. Her sister would have asked too many questions that Alison couldn't have answered.

A smile on her lips, Alison laid down the letter. It was already too late to send an answer. She would arrive home before the letter. *If* she went home. In the gathering twilight, she stared into the emptiness of the room and wished she knew what to do.

AT TEN MINUTES after midnight, Alison walked into the Pine Tree Lounge wearing a floaty dress of

sheer yellow material that was kept modest by the matching slip underneath. Her hair was pinned up at the sides in a sophisticated style that made her look citified and lovely. Not that she wasn't lovely with it down. He preferred to see her hair down, especially spread over his pillow....

Dangerous thoughts those. He dragged his mind away from them, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked like spring walking into that dark lounge, and he felt his stomach clench.

He was in the middle of his monologue. It was copy that he'd written since he'd come to the mountains. Marty had partially inspired it; his own teenage years had supplied the rest.

He went on with his act, a portion of his mind juggling the mental pictures he used as memory aids, the other portion watching Alison. She went to the bar and ordered a drink. Then she turned casually to watch him perform.

Joel was working his usual magic on the crowd and making his delivery look effortless. He gave no indication that he'd noticed her entrance, but he had to have seen her. There was just one small problem. Now that she was here she didn't know what she would do if Joel simply nodded to her and walked out the door. She sipped her drink and tried to hold her shaking knees together, wishing desperately she had stayed home in her cabin.

He was finishing his monologue. He told the audience good-night and stepped down from the tiny stage.

She tried a smile and hoped it didn't look as shaky as she felt.

At the bar, he stopped. "Hello, Joel."

He dipped his head. "Hello, sweet. Aren't you out a little late for a working lady?"

"Some of us are out late, some of us work late." He bowed again, acknowledging the truth of her words, then slid into the chair beside her and lifted his hand for service. A drink was brought, obviously his usual. He didn't touch it.

"You weren't in class today." She rushed on, not wanting him to think she needed to know where he'd been and what he'd been doing. "The kids asked about you." That brought no response from him, either. Still eyeing her glass, she said, "I'd like, just once, to know what you're thinking."

She looked up at him then.

"I was thinking how out of place you look here. Almost as out of place as in that club in the city."

It was so far from what she'd expected him to say. Her pride was all she had left. She lifted her chin. "As out of place as I would look in your life?"

"An interesting analogy. And an apropos one."

"Well, that's plain enough, I guess." Embarrassed warmth rushed into her cheeks as she clenched her teeth and rose. "Since you've made everything quite clear, I'll say good-bye—"

He was on his feet. "I'll follow you home."

"That's not necessary."

"Not for your sake. For mine."

Outside, the breeze lifted her skirt to swirl it around her legs, reminding her that her elaborate preparations had been wasted. His car was parked close to the building, hers farther out. She walked alone to hers, got in and slammed the door. She gunned the motor and raced out of the parking lot. Just because he had some misguided, chivalrous idea about seeing her safely home didn't mean she had to make it easy for him.

Joel watched the red taillights whizzing around curves in front of him and thought grimly, *The little fool is going to kill herself*. Alison took another curve with reckless skill, and the nerves in his stomach tightened. She was a good driver, but if anything happened to her, it would be his fault. He shouldn't have rejected her there in a public place. He should have waited until they were alone.

But Joel knew what would have happened if he'd waited. He would have followed her home and gone inside with her, stripped that frothy dress off her body and loved her till they were both exhausted.

In the moonlit clearing she pulled up in front of her cabin, stopped the car and got out. Behind her, Joel slammed his door and followed her up the steps. At the door she turned. "As you can see, I'm safely home."

"A fact due to benevolent gods more than careful driving." He stood a foot away, looking annoyed.

Fine. Good. At least she could make him feel some emotion, even if it wasn't love. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

He seemed not to hear her. "You look too beautiful to touch." He hadn't meant to say that. It had just come out.

Her heart lifting, she said, "Are you going to touch me?"

Every sensible thought in his head told him the answer must be no. But he went to her, clasping his hands around her small waist, belted tightly in the close-fitting chiffon. "Yes, God help me, I'm going to touch you." He cradled her hips in his hands and drew her closer.

Lifting her arms, Alison put her palms on his shoulders, her heart singing. She shouldn't give in to him like this so quickly. She should make him suffer a little. "I really dislike you a lot, Mr. Brandon."

"The feeling is mutual, Ms. Powell. I kept thinking that if by some miracle you didn't kill yourself out there on the road, I'd strangle you."

"Are you still bent on murder?"

His fingers moved gently over her belly, sliding the chiffon against the silk. "Actually, it's the farthest thing from my mind at the moment."

"I'd like, just once, to know what you're thinking."

"You know what I'm thinking, woman."

His throaty intensity matched the caressing movements of his hands. She lifted sparkling eyes to him. "Not...precisely. Perhaps you'd care to show me?"

He was taking advantage of her, selfishly taking what she offered. It was wrong, so wrong. He should turn and go. "I'd like that very much, sweet."

Their exchange was a brief excursion into the delicious intimacy Ali-

son sought, but after they had walked inside the cabin and she'd turned on the lamp, she discovered he'd replaced his mask.

"Turn around."

The cool order disturbed her, but she stepped away from the table and did as he asked. Expertly he began unfastening the buttons that ran in a long row down her back. The night air traced chilly fingers down the sensitive skin on Alison's spine. Helped by Joel's hands, her dress floated to the floor and settled at her feet. His warm hand locked around her ankle, and he lifted one foot, then the other, untangling them from her dress. From his kneeling position at her feet, he tossed the yellow froth away. Then he lifted her slip over her head and sent it skittering to the floor.

She couldn't turn, couldn't bear to look at him and see the expression on his face. The way he was undressing her was wonderfully tender, delightfully erotic...and terribly wrong. "What...is it?"

He didn't answer. Gathering all her courage, wearing only a wisp of a bra and a brief lace concoction at her hips, she turned. "What's wrong?"

"I wasn't aware that something was wrong." His dark eyes moved over her. "It looks to me as if everything is quite right. You are...exquisite."

She felt exposed to him, as transparent, vulnerable and fragile as blown glass. He must see how much, how desperately, she loved him. A whispering sixth sense told her he did, and her love was making him feel as vulnerable as she, even

though he still wore his green jacket, the correct shirt, the narrow tie.

"Joel—" Thinking only of getting close to him, she stepped forward and glided her palms up his chest. He groaned, and his arms came around her. He encircled her, pulling her so tightly to him that she could feel the imprint of his clothes on her skin. Surprised by his burst of passion, she inhaled sharply.

He was filled with a sudden, deep hatred for himself. He was pulling her close, even though he knew that pushing her away would be the best thing in the world for her. Out of his own conflicting urges, he searched desperately for a way to ensure her rejection of him.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it? Body contact? Sex? It better be all you want. Because it's all I've ever had to give."

"I don't believe that—"

"Then you're a fool." He pushed her away. "Love is a joke played on the human race by Mother Nature. Obviously she has a better sense of humor than all of us."

Alison was looking at him with that starkly hurt look that ripped at his soul. Didn't she understand what a swine he was? Didn't she understand that he couldn't stop wanting her even though he didn't love her?

He released her, turned his back to her and thrust a hand through his hair. "Usually when a woman starts looking at me the way you do, I tell her, thanks a lot but goodbye. I've meant to do that with you, but I—" He faced her, his face dark and ravaged. "You have some crazy kind of hold over me. You're deep in my mind, like an unfinished routine I

can't work out. How much do you love me, Alison? Enough to go to bed with me, even though I can't offer you love in return?"

"I love you enough...to take whatever part of yourself you can give me." Before he could refuse her, she slid her hands under his jacket, pushing it down his arms and off. She unfastened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt. His eyes blazed with pleasure at being undressed by her. When he was wearing as little as she, he caught her hands and took the initiative, finishing the task of undressing her as if he was unwrapping a priceless present. Then he carried her to the bed.

His lovemaking was passionate, demanding, all consuming. She gave and gave, murmuring the love words that had been denied her before. He kissed them from her mouth, but the moment he lifted his lips to explore the silken skin of her breasts, she told him again how beautiful he was and how much she adored him.

Each murmured word drove him to new heights of sensual expertise. And when at last he made her his, there was nothing left for her to say. She was beyond words, beyond thought. All that was left was Joel, Joel, Joel....

*

WHEN SHE AWOKE in the morning, he was gone.

In the bed she had shared with him, she turned her face into the pillow and moaned in distress. She had gambled and lost.

How was it possible to know a man so well, to lie in his arms and receive his kisses and caresses and

still not understand him? How was it possible to possess and be possessed and yet remain alone?

Alison crawled out of bed and stepped into her shower, hoping the hot water would bring her awake. After a careful application of makeup and a cup of black coffee, she tugged on a bright yellow sleeveless sweatshirt and denim shorts and felt nearly ready to face the day.

In the dining hall, Eve took one look at her. Her shrewd eyes saw past the makeup, the carefully arranged smile. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Alison's camouflage had failed her. "I'm fine." She averted her eyes and picked up a stack of gunnysacks lying inside a cardboard box, transferring them to the table. Eve had already set out a mind-boggling collection of rainbow-colored balls, Hula Hoops, flags, ribbons, baseball bats, shuttlecocks and other assorted pieces of game equipment.

"Here," Eve said, dropping a whistle on a loop of red yarn over Alison's head. "You'll need this. Guard it with your life. It's the only thing that will keep you sane. And keep your chin up. The game isn't over yet."

The expression in her eyes told Alison she wasn't talking about the games at camp. "Yes," she said, "it is."

"Well," Eve's eyes dropped. "I'm sorry to hear that."

With all there was to do, Alison was able to achieve a numbness of mind that allowed her to function. By the time the first children arrived, she was perspiring from exertion. Very quickly she saw that Eve

was one-hundred-percent correct about the whistle. It was the only thing that saved her sanity. It couldn't, however, save her from Mrs. Brisdale, Marty's mother.

The woman had the bad manners to come early, Marty in tow. The boy, smart lad that he was, disappeared. Alison was trying, unsuccessfully, to start the gunnysack race for the seven-year-olds. She had made the mistake of handing out the sacks without giving the youngsters strict orders to stand still. She had instantly created ten Mexican jumping beans over which she hadn't the slightest control. On top of which Mrs. Brisdale "—Call me Heather, dear, please do—" considered it her official duty to chat with Alison.

Jordan and Lisa were taking practice jumps on the same six inches of turf. Jordan bumped into Lisa and knocked her down, giving her a bloody nose. Lisa wailed like a banshee. Alison rushed over to pick her up and staunch the flow, but Lisa's mother appeared out of nowhere and, like a ministering angel, gathered her up, and told Alison not to worry, that Lisa seemed to get nosebleeds frequently.

Alison breathed a sigh of relief, only to turn and discover that her gunnysack contestants were scattered across the lawn like grazing sheep. And Mrs. Brisdale had materialized again, at her elbow.

"I do hope the little girl isn't hurt. Children are such a worry. Are you sure there isn't something I can do?"

Alison looked the woman straight in the eye. "Yes. You can stand back, because I'm going to blow this whistle."

An ear-splitting whistle blast and a sharp order from Alison to line up did the trick. In no time her contestants were wobbling behind the starting line, which was Terry's signal to turn and say plaintively, "You can't start yet, I have to go to the bathroom."

At that precise moment, Joel sauntered down the hill.

"The day is complete," Alison muttered. "Terry, take off your sack, go to the dining hall and go to the bathroom. When you come back we'll have a special race between you and the winner. Everyone else get ready and *stand still!*"

Terry pouted and refused to move. Joel came up behind him, scooped him off his feet, threw him over his shoulder, sack and all, and headed back up the hill with him.

At lunchtime she was slapping hamburgers on a grill and dealing them into buns. Being in the realm of spattering grease kept her blessedly free from Mrs. Brisdale's Liz Claiborne-suited body and her omnipresence. One o'clock rolled around, and it was time to brace herself for the competition games among her older students.

The trouble started during the badminton final. Playoff matches had eliminated all contenders except Marty and Tom, but Alison didn't like the way the two boys faced off on each side of the net.

At first they seemed evenly matched, with Marty having a slight edge. But as the game progressed, it was clear that Marty had been toying with his opponent. He was quick, sleek, graceful. Halfway through the match, he pressed his advantage by

slamming several serves to the ground for a final score of 21-11. Red-faced, glowering, Tom walked off the court. Marty was declared the class champion and given a small trophy.

An ache centering in her heart, Alison watched him bound over the grass toward Joel, brimming with eagerness to show off his prize.

Alison collapsed on the grass to watch the softball match, which Joel's team won handily. Then the group moved to the lunch table Eve had cleared of debris. With great care she brought out numerous cream pies: lemon-meringue, vanilla, strawberry-cream, banana and chocolate. Two of the fathers volunteered to compete in pie-eating, along with most of the boys in Alison's class.

She was amazed at how quickly three of her boys gobbled one whole pie and were ready to tackle another. A boy named Gerald looked as if he was going to be the winner.

Suddenly there was a commotion behind the table. Tom streaked away toward the lake carrying Marty's trophy. Marty cried out and raced after him, his freckled face beet-red with fury. Joel had been sitting on the ground, legs crossed, watching the pie-eating contest, but now he took off in hot pursuit of the boys. Alison followed. She crested the hill just in time to see Tom race for the dock. At the edge of it, he stopped and turned. "Here's your precious trophy, Shorter. Go get it." With that, he heaved the trophy into the lake.

Marty grabbed Joel's arm to stop him from kicking off his shoes. "I'll do it."

"You're still a fledgling swimmer, ace. This requires diving underwater—"

"I said I'd do it," Marty said.

Joel's eyes roamed over the boy's face. "All right, listen to me. You take deep breaths before you do anything. Always a breath first, then let it out underwater. You hear?"

"I hear." Marty pulled off his sneakers.

Joel followed him to the dock. "Stay cool. Keep your head. Pretend it's a game."

Marty grinned. "Relax, man. You did a good job teaching me. I know what to do."

Marty turned, grabbed his nose and jumped in. Her heart in her mouth, Alison stepped onto the dock.

"He's okay. He'll find it."

Wordlessly she reached out to Joel. He closed his warm hand around her fingers in a comforting hold.

Up on the hill, the waiting crowd was just as silent. Suddenly a woman jostled through the people and trotted down to the dock. "What are you doing? What is going on here? Someone said Marty had jumped into the water, but that's impossible. He—"

Without taking his eyes off Marty, Joel said, "Lady, you talk too much. Close your mouth, or I'll throw you in after him."

How many times did the boy bob up and down before he rose above the water triumphant, the trophy in his hand? Alison didn't know. But

when Marty headed for the dock with his inept crawl, she felt as if her heart would burst with pride for him, and for Joel, too.

"You can swim. You really can—" Marty's mother gathered her wet boy into her arms.

Marty wriggled. "Don't, Mom. I'm getting you all wet."

"I don't care," the woman said, making Alison's opinion of her soar. "I'm so proud of you."

Eve took charge then, hustling everybody back to the dining hall for a snack and a drink. Then the parents began collecting their children and saying goodbye. Suddenly they were all gone and the camp was empty and quiet. Only Joel, Eve and Alison remained.

"Well, that's it till next year," said Eve, sounding more sorry than glad. "You take the night off. Go out to dinner. Have a drink. Relax. You deserve it." Her eyes flicked to Joel. "Thanks for your help. It's always nice to have a man around."

Outside, in the golden afternoon, Joel walked silently beside Alison to her cabin. At the top of the steps, she turned to him. Gathering her courage, she said, "Will I... see you tonight?"

He smiled. "I'll be working, and you, if you're wise, will be sleeping. I've kept you awake too many nights as it is."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. I can sleep in."

"I'm not good at goodbyes, sweet. It's best if we say ours now."

THAT NIGHT, his timing was off. The routine wasn't going well. He sat on the stool the management had pro-

vided and wondered suddenly what he was doing there. Memories buzzed incessantly in his brain, memories of words. *You're not a lovable boy, Joel. How can I love you when you don't do what you're told?*

He had been as intractable as Marty. And, childlike, he had accepted what his father had said as true.

He wasn't a child anymore.

Suddenly he wanted to be done and out of there. He clamped down on his impatience and finished his monologue. His face tight with tension, he drove back over the curving road at a greater speed than Alison had taken it the night before. His black mood increased when he pulled up in front of her cabin and saw that it was dark. He rapped at the door. "*Alison. Alison!*" There was no sound from inside, no sleepy voice answering him.

His heart sinking, he pulled open the creaking screen door and went in. There was only darkness and a heavy silence. He was alone.

He turned on the light and saw with searing clarity that the cabin was neat, clean and tidy. The table was cleared, the dishes put away. He went to a bureau drawer and yanked it open. The drawer was empty. She was gone.

The full import of what he'd done—and what he'd lost—hit him. She had offered him the most unselfish, believing love he'd ever known. He had returned her love by kissing her lightly and telling her goodbye. This time, she was gone forever.

Joel slumped heavily into a chair. In the quiet of the cabin, his body sagged with fatigue and disappointment, but his mind sprang to life. Along with all the other things he loved about her, Alison had a sense of humor. There might, just might be a way to undo the damage he'd done.

HE STAYED to do the Sunday-night show, but his heart wasn't in it. On Monday, he called for the small plane that would take him back to New York.

It was nearly ten p.m. when he walked out of the airport and got into a taxi. Noisy, dusty, hot, the city impinged on his senses. He was glad to enter his building and be sealed in the hermetic quiet.

The doorman looked at his unusual luggage with the same odd expression that the pilot of the charter plane had. "Good evening, Mr. Brandon. Nice to see you back."

"Good evening, Miles." He wished he could say it was nice to be back. He was stopping off at the apartment only to touch base with Ted and make his travel arrangements.

He'd forgotten how to put his apartment key in the lock. He'd been gone only six weeks, but it seemed like a lifetime.

Impatiently he pushed open the door—and discovered that the place was ablaze with lights. He stood there, startled, but at that precise moment, he heard a noise in his bedroom. Something dropped on the carpeted floor with a thud, and a muttered word followed.

A woman emerged from Joel's bedroom. She was dressed in a costume that looked like Hollywood's idea of what kittenish maids were wearing this season, a thigh-high ruffled black shirt, a heart-shaped neckline showing the shapely beginnings of two lovely breasts, a perky white cap and black lace stockings on legs that seemed to have no end. Her lips were lush and full, her cheeks rouged. The only discreet thing about Alison Powell was her hair. Her red-gold waves were caught back and pinned high off her neck. In her hand was a broom.

"How did you get in here?"

She took a brass object from her pocket. "The maid had a key. And Tracy knows the maid."

"So you weren't in this alone. When did you get here?"

"I flew in yesterday." She smiled nervously at him.

"Why are you here, Alison?"

"I'm cleaning."

"Cleaning? I see." His voice silky, he said, "Is there anything else that you'd like to do for me?"

"I'd very much like," she said, "to hit you over the head with this broom." She shook it at him.

Nothing showed on his face. "Come here."

The tone of his voice was not encouraging. She didn't move. "It's all right. I just want to show you something."

Hesitantly she came closer. He snatched the broom from her and tossed it aside, then clasped her hand and led her back into the living room. Alongside his carryall and the attaché case that held his writing sat

a green garbage bag. He walked her to the bag. "Look inside."

Alison unwrapped the plastic tie and looked. Mounds of paper balls rustled inside. Eyes bright, she looked up at him. "What were you going to do with these?"

"Bring them to Iowa so you could throw them at me."

She felt dazed. He had planned to come for her. Joy blazed, lighting a fire in her eyes. "Isn't it lucky you won't have to travel all that way...to get what you deserve?"

To Joel, those eyes looked chock-full of devilish anticipation. Instinctively he raised his arms, but it was too late. She dived into the bag, came up with both hands full and began pelting him with the paper balls he'd spent an hour making.

But when the bag was empty of ammunition and she began to scoop balls off the floor to throw at him, he kicked it aside and reached for her.

The joy that had been simmering inside her surfaced. She raised blue eyes alive with laughter to him. "Was it the maid's uniform that did it?"

"No," he said, drinking in the sight of her, knowing he would never let her go. "It was having you walk out on me that did it."

She pulled away to look at him with mock indignation. "I didn't walk out on you. You told me good-bye."

"I went back to collect you Saturday night, and you were gone."

Her joy soared to new heights. "You knew then that you wanted us to be together?"

"Just try to walk out of here, sweet, and see how far you get."

Her relief was beautiful to see. "You don't know how much courage it took for me to come to you one more time."

He pulled away to look into her face. "I do know. And I'm giving you fair warning right now, love. I'll make a lousy husband and a worse father."

"That's hogwash," she declared.

"Hogwash?" His smile held a wealth of amusement.

"Of course it is. When I saw how you were with Marty, I... I knew that if I couldn't have you for the father of my children, I wouldn't have any. You just don't know what you are, Joel. You're a wonderful man, and I..." She faltered, took a breath and said, "I love you."

She was waiting; he knew it. He reached up to pluck the cap from her head and remove the pins from her hair. Gently cupping her chin, he

brushed her lips with his. "You're a fighter, Alison, and a believer. You've also got a crazy sense of humor. How could I not love you?"

She felt the words on her mouth, heard the words with her ears. They filled her senses and her heart. Soaring elation made her tremble. "Thank goodness," she said.

"Thank goodness?"

She smiled up at him. "I was afraid that if you decided to throw me out I'd have to tell you a silly bear story to frighten you into letting me stay, and then I'd have to growl convincingly. I've been practicing, but my technique isn't nearly as good as yours, and I—"

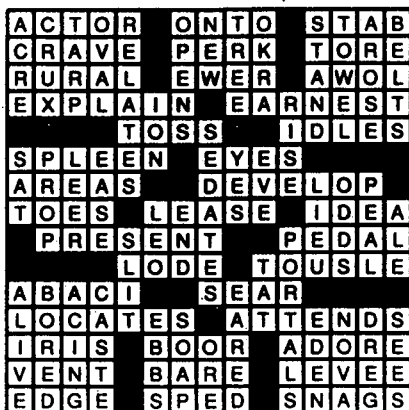
His laughter delighted her. "So you did know."

"Of course." She smiled. "I guess the joke's on you, my love."

"I guess it is," he said, and he bent his head to kiss her hello.



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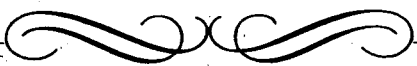


SAMANTHA DAY

There Must Be Love



Vanessa vowed never again to get involved with a man who had no respect for marriage, commitment and fidelity. Will Shane Wilder make her break that vow?



Vanessa briefly looked up from the page as she caught a glimpse of a tall male figure standing by the library door, then continued reading.

"And to thank you, Bertie Butterbug," Mother Nature said, "you and all the other Butterbugs shall have wings as varied and as colorful as the flowers. You will no longer be Butterbugs but Butterflies!"

She closed the book and smiled at the children sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her. "That's it, kids. You can go and choose your books now. Remember," she called as the children began to scramble toward the wooden shelves lined with picture books. "Print your names on the card in the back of the book. Then return the card to me."

She turned her attention to the doorway. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so." He grinned. "Tell me—how did Bertie Butterbug earn his wings?"

Vanessa returned his smile easily. "He and all the other Butterbugs planted flower seeds for Mother Nature to brighten up a drab world. She gave them wings to thank them." She smiled again. "Is that all, or can I help you with something else?"

"Actually," he said, his deep voice a lazy drawl, "I'm here to help you. I'm volunteering. You are Ms. Evans, aren't you?"

"I am," she said with a slight frown. "And you are?"

"Wilder," he answered briefly.

"Than what?" She was unable to resist the response.

His eyes flashed and his smile widened. "Shane Wilder—actually quite tame and usually harmless. I read about the lack of volunteers in the schools in this area, and I have some free time on my hands each day, so—" he shrugged—"here I am."

Vanessa glanced over his lithe, lean frame, the wide expanse of shoulders and his self-assured stance, skeptically. Her doubts showed plainly.

"I've already talked to the principal," Shane said. "She seemed satisfied. She was going to come down and introduce me, but was held up by a phone call."

Vanessa nodded. Bettina Blakely was a quick and shrewd judge of character. If she had any doubts at all about this man, he wouldn't have got this far. "All right," she said.

He looked around the room. "A library isn't quite what I had in mind, but," he added, his eyes widening as they met hers, "I don't think I'm going to mind."

Vanessa heard a flirtatious note in his voice and looked again at the clear, smiling eyes, his strong, handsome face.

"I'm not here on a whim, Ms. Evans," he said assuredly. "I'm serious about this."

"Good," she said, putting aside some of her doubts. "The school would love to have someone with the

time to come in and work with a few of the problem readers, but we need a promise of commitment." She looked at him resolutely. "A lot of these kids come from rather—well, chaotic backgrounds. They need the school to be a stable, dependable environment."

He looked at her, his eyes suddenly intense. "I can understand the need for continuity in a kid's life, Ms. Evans."

Vanessa looked at him closely for a moment and then nodded. "What I'd like to do, Mr. Wilder, is—"

"Shane," he interrupted. "Call me Shane."

"All right—Shane," she agreed a little reluctantly. "Now—"

"What shall I call you?" he interrupted again, his eyes gleaming.

"Sometimes after a day with the kids, I start thinking my name is Teacher. But it's Vanessa."

"Vanessa," he repeated, reaching out for a handshake. "It's a beautiful name. It suits you."

"Thank you," Vanessa replied, extending her hand cautiously. His hand was warm and firm. "Now, Mr.—Shane—are you sure you want to sacrifice that much of your time?"

"I'm sure," he said firmly. "I work for a few hours every morning and my afternoons are usually free. I want to spend them doing something worthwhile."

"What do you do?" she asked curiously.

"I'm a writer," he said. "Detective novels," he drawled and was obviously amused by the look of surprise on her face. "You mean you haven't read about the continuing

exploits of Matt Savage, Private Eye?"

Vanessa shook her head and smiled apologetically. "No. Sorry."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Well—they aren't for everyone. Now, what can I do to help out here?"

"We want to start a special reading program," Vanessa explained. "A one-on-one thing, to turn certain kids on to reading."

Shane chuckled suddenly. "I like it—training future fans. Do you have a particular child in mind?"

Vanessa wasn't going to commit herself further until she had talked to Bettina. As anxious as she was to get the reading program under way, she wanted to be absolutely sure Shane Wilder was the right person for the job. Shane Wilder was a very attractive man. Dark curls tumbled around his head in attractive disorder, framing his strong-boned face. His heavy-lidded and thickly lashed gray eyes gleamed constantly with a natural lazy amusement.

Vanessa might have found him attractive but for that come-hither look in his eyes. He had the look of a philanderer, she noted cynically, and she'd had enough of that kind of man with Todd. Good looks in a man accounted for very little, she had decided long ago.

"Let's go talk to Mrs. Blakely," Vanessa said, resigning herself to the fact that this man would be working with her. "We'll get the details worked out."

Vanessa called Bettina and arranged for her to meet them in the staff room. "So you found her, Shane," Bettina said in her soft, lilting Caribbean accent as she sat down

at the table with them. "Did Vanessa explain the ins and outs of the proposed reading program?"

"She did," Shane said with his easy smile. "I think it's a great idea."

"I thought he'd be good with Tommy," Vanessa put in. "You know—Tommy Hawkes, in Gail's room. I think he'd respond well to working with a man."

Bettina was nodding, one lean finger tapping the side of her mug. "Yes, Tommy would be just right. He's eight years old. He spent most of his life in a remote mining community in the north of Manitoba. After his father died in a mining accident last year his mother decided to move them to Winnipeg. It's been a pretty rough year for both of them, although I think things are beginning to improve."

Vanessa cut in. "But on top of everything else, Tommy's language skills are weak. He could really benefit from a regular reading program."

Shane was nodding, his eyes thoughtful. "If he lived up north for all those years, he'll probably like books on animals, the outdoors."

Bettina looked at Vanessa and smiled, obviously pleased. "Well, Shane, I have a feeling you're going to work out just fine. Vanessa will give you a hand—this program is her idea."

He looked at Vanessa suddenly and caught her troubled expression. He grinned and winked audaciously. With a little shake of her head, Vanessa smiled back in spite of herself.

VANESSA let herself in through the kitchen door, smiling a cheerful greeting to her grandmother. "Hi, Gran."

Cora Evans looked up from the carrot she was paring. "Hello, dear."

Marcie Evans ran into the kitchen and stopped smack in front of Vanessa. "Hi, Aunt Van." Fifteen years old, she had long, coltish limbs and sparkling hazel eyes.

"Hi, Marcie." Vanessa smiled warmly. "All finished with the homework?"

"Yeah. Except," she added, making a face, "I've got to start a paper for English. We've got to write something about career choices people have made. And we've got to interview someone first." Marcie was obviously not pleased about the project. "I'd rather not."

Vanessa laughed. "You'll think of something."

"I hope so. If not, I guess I'll use you," Marcie said unenthusiastically, taking plates from the cupboard.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, kid," Vanessa said dryly.

Vanessa left the room smiling and went upstairs.

She changed quickly into her favorite old jeans and pulled out the pins holding up her hair. Long golden hair, still streaked by the summer sun, fell around her shoulders in soft, ringletlike curls. Absently, she ran a comb through the curls.

She could hardly believe ten years had passed since the accident that had left both her and Marcie orphans. Her large, almond-shaped amber eyes grew troubled. She had been almost eighteen, Marcie, her

brother David's child, barely five. David was driving home from a wedding with his wife, Lisa, and his parents. They never made it. A drunk driver sped through a red light, slamming head-on into their car. No one survived the flaming wreck.

Cora, devastated by the loss of her son and grandson, had taken Vanessa and Marcie into her home. The three of them had clung together, giving each other support until the pain gradually faded.

Todd Hughes had entered their little circle only briefly as it turned out. Vanessa had married him at nineteen and divorced him two years later. Immediately afterward she gave up the tiny apartment they'd shared and moved back into her grandmother's house.

AFTER SUPPER, Vanessa settled in the living room with Cora and Marcie, the evening paper on her lap.

"Gran—have you read any books by Shane Wilder?"

Cora looked up from her book, blinking over top of her glasses. "Sure. He writes those detective novels, doesn't he?" Cora looked at Vanessa closely. "Have you met him?" she asked.

"Well, actually, he's volunteered for that reading program I've been wanting to start," Vanessa shrugged.

Marcie looked away from the television show she had been half following while listening to the conversation between her aunt and great-grandmother. "I've got a great idea," she said suddenly, sitting up straight in her chair, eyes sparkling. "I could interview Shane Wilder for

my paper! You could ask him, couldn't you?" she asked Vanessa.

"Oh, no, not the Bambi eyes," Vanessa muttered as Marcie widened her eyes imploringly.

"Please?" Marcie requested, as if her young life depended upon Vanessa's answer.

Vanessa scowled. "Oh—I'll think about it."

AS SHANE began going through a picture book on Canadian animals, Tommy's restlessness was evident. But Shane turned the pages slowly, all the while talking to the boy. His patience was admirable. Before long, Tommy was pointing to the pages, telling Shane about the animals he recognized.

Confident that things were going well between them, Vanessa turned her attention to several boxes of new books that had arrived. She leafed through many, pausing to read passages, putting some aside to read more thoroughly at a later time.

"Now I can see why you're a librarian."

"Oh!" Vanessa returned Shane's smile a little self-consciously. "I do love books," she admitted. She closed the book she had been reading and put it aside. "How did it go with Tommy?"

"Pretty good, I think. He's a quiet little guy."

"He is," Vanessa agreed. "If you can be patient, I'm sure he'll come around."

"Oh, I can be very patient," Shane said with a slow smile as he perched on the corner of her desk.

Vanessa ignored the intimation in his voice. "Does that patience extend to other aspects of your life,

like, say, interviews?" If she was going to ask, it might as well be now.

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Well, my niece, Marcie, would like to interview you. She's doing a paper on career choices and thinks yours is more interesting than mine. I know it's a lot to ask. And I hardly know—"

"I'll do it," he interrupted. His smile was quick and charming. "How about tonight at your place?"

She hesitated, feeling reluctant to have him in the privacy of her home. "All right," she said finally.

THE DOORBELL rang just after eight. Vanessa answered the front door, smiling a polite greeting.

They entered the living room and Shane instantly charmed both Marcie and Cora.

"Make yourself comfortable," Vanessa said, gesturing to a big, overstuffed armchair.

Marcie started her questions. "What made you decide to become a writer?" she asked.

"It grew from a university assignment." He smiled at Marcie's look of surprise. "I was actually majoring in economics," he went on, "but had signed up for a class in creative writing. Mainly," he added with a chuckle, "because I saw someone in the enrollment line I wanted to meet." He caught the flash of derision in Vanessa's eyes and grinned at her.

"Anyway, the professor wanted each of us to pick one of the popular genres of fiction—sci-fi, Westerns, romance—and write three or four chapters and a synopsis of our own story. I liked mysteries, so I invented Matt Savage. I surprised my-

self," Shane admitted. "The writing came easily and I became intrigued with the whole process." He grinned. "I passed. And my prof was encouraging. He thought I should pursue writing, but—" he shrugged "—I wasn't all that interested at that point."

"What made you change your mind?"

"My friend—the one I met in the line," he added with a quick, teasing wink at Vanessa, "sent what I had written to a publisher. They dangled a contract along with a nice advance in front of me. What poor, struggling university student could resist?"

"Were you able to make a living at it right away?"

"No, not really. I had to take all kinds of part-time and temporary jobs to support myself at first. It wasn't exactly what I had planned, but I found writing gave me a freedom I would never have had with a regular career."

Marcie nodded. "And more money, probably," she said guilelessly.

There was a hint of indulgence in Shane's smile. "Eventually," he agreed. "Any more questions?" he asked.

"Just a few," Marcie answered, settling down with her pen and notepad.

"Well, Shane," Cora said when Marcie had finished, "I certainly enjoyed listening in on this interview. It was very nice of you to consent to it."

"Yes, it was," Marcie agreed quickly. "Thank you very much, Shane. I really appreciate it. I'm sure it's good for an A. In fact, if it's

okay, I think I'll go get started writing it up now, while it's still fresh in my mind." She stood up, gathering her papers together and followed Cora into the kitchen. "Night, Shane, Aunt Nessie," she called over her shoulder.

"Nessie?" Shane murmured, his eyebrows rising.

"For her use only," Vanessa said quickly. "No one else would dare."

"What would happen if someone did?" he asked, his eyes gleaming.

Vanessa smoothed her skirts over her knees. "I'd deck them," she said calmly.

Shane let out a shout of laughter. "I would have thought you were too ladylike for fisticuffs."

"I am. Except under provocation."

"And—Nessie is provocation? What else provokes you?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Bullies, liars and cheats," she answered promptly.

"Ah, of course." He nodded. "If I told you I'm none of the above, would you go out with me?"

"Go out as in to step outside to say good-night when you leave?" she asked, deliberately obtuse.

"No, silly lady. I mean, go out as in on a date—to dinner, a show, roller-skating, a walk in the park.... Will you?"

Vanessa gave a little smile as she shook her head. "No. I don't think it would be a good idea." She looked at her hands clasped on her lap.

"I'll ask again," he said, surprised but not put off. "Just in case you change your mind." His look said clearly that he was sure she would. "In the meantime, I've got to run."

They went into the hall, and he took his jacket from her. His eyes held hers. "And Vanessa..."

She looked at him cautiously. "Yes?"

"I don't give up easily," he murmured, laying a finger briefly across her lips. "Not when it's something I really want." He turned with a wave. "See you Thursday."

Vanessa watched him run easily down the steps and disappear into the night. Shaking her head ruefully, she shut the door and rubbed a knuckle over her lips, still feeling his fleeting touch and wondering just how persistent he might be—and just how much resistance she really had when it came to smooth-talking, charmingly handsome men. Her track record wasn't all that good.

Todd had been her first real boyfriend. She had met him halfway through her second year of university. Just beginning to recover from the horrendous shock of the accident, she had been instantly attracted to his good looks and charming manner. Todd seemed all fun, laughter and good times. Starry-eyed, she'd fallen deeply in love almost instantly. Six months later they were married.

She had started teaching while Todd continued at university. She had little time for parties and socializing.

Knowing Todd's restlessness, his need for physical activity, she had been understanding when he began to spend more time away from home, playing handball or hockey with his friends. She tried not to mind when he started going to an occasional party without her.

"There's a party tonight at Rochelle's," he'd said to her one morning before she left for work. "I don't suppose you can make it."

"No," she'd answered, running a comb through her hair. "I've got those parent-teacher interviews, remember? You go ahead if you want," she'd added, wishing he wouldn't, wishing he'd be home for her when she finished.

The interviews had gone much more smoothly than she'd thought possible. She'd decided on the spur of the moment to join Todd at the party. Expecting loud music and a babble of voices within, she didn't bother to knock. Pushing open the door, she'd walked directly into the living room.

There was a party all right, a private party for two. Amid flickering candlelight and empty wine bottles, Vanessa found her husband in the arms of another woman. With a low moan of pain, she fled home.

It was much later when Todd finally crept home. Vanessa had looked into his shifting blue eyes and had known, as sure as if he'd told her, that it had happened before and would happen again. When confronted, he'd scarcely bothered to deny it.

Vanessa knew she could never trust him again. Their marriage was over.

*

VANESSA STOOD in the doorway to the staff room. Shane was seated across the table from Bettina and flanked by two teachers, Carla and Gail, each laughingly responsive to his flirtatious behavior. As Vanessa went to sit down, she felt a pang of

disappointment. He had asked her out and she had refused. Who would he turn his interest to now?

She spent her coffee break listening to Gail and Carla chatter like a couple of magpies, each vying for Shane's attention. Shane enjoyed every minute of it. Vanessa caught Bettina's eye and raised her eyebrows. See? her expression said. Bettina merely grinned and winked.

"By the way, Shane," Bettina broke into the conversation. "My husband and I are giving a Halloween party Saturday night for the staff. As the newest member of that staff, will you come?"

"Oh, yes," Gail said enthusiastically.

"Wear a costume," Carla instructed, leaning toward Shane so that her arm brushed against his.

"How can I resist?" Shane grinned.

BETTINA'S HUSBAND, Ben, answered the door the night of the party, looking askance at her disguise.

"It's me," Vanessa said, showing her plastic fangs in a smile.

Ben hung her coat in the hall closet. "I hardly recognized you."

Bettina came through from the kitchen dressed in a colorful African costume.

"I like your costume. Especially the fangs," Bettina grinned. "Who are you going to vamp? Seems to me there will be some—ah, new blood tonight."

They laid out the party foods on trays and platters, handing them to Ben to take downstairs.

"Van?"

Something in Bettina's voice made Vanessa look up from the cheese she was cutting. "What is it?"

"Ben thinks one of the teachers in his school might have invited Todd tonight," she said with a note of apology in her voice. Ben and Todd were teachers in the same high school.

Vanessa lifted her shoulders in a shrug of resignation. "Don't worry about it," she said. "He probably won't show, and if he does—it won't be the first time I've bumped into him in public. It happens."

The large family room in the basement was dimly lit and decorated for Halloween. Dry ice, hidden behind the bar, emitted steamy wisps colored red by an overhead light. Vanessa caught several puzzled looks and grinned, enjoying the feeling of not being recognized.

Charlie Chaplin appeared suddenly at her side. "I'll let you bite my neck," he said, twitching his mustache.

Vanessa turned and bared her fangs in a grin. "I promise not to draw blood."

"Vanessa," Shane said confidently, lifting a strand of black nylon hair from her shoulders.

He was wearing a shabby, too-big suit jacket, long baggy pants and oversize well-worn shoes. A bowler hat set back on a wig, a wild disarray of dark curls, completed his costume. His lips twitched under a shaggy mustache.

"I like it," she said, meeting his eyes with a smile. "Though I kind of expected Matt Savage to show up."

"I left him between the pages of a book, where he belongs," Shane said. His eyes roved over her, linger-

ing on the curves revealed by the well-fitted black dress. "You look—kinky," he said. "Do you bite?"

"Shane Wilder, you're incorrigible." She pointed toward the center of the room. "If it's pain you're looking for, there's a cat over there who's dying to get her claws into you." Carla was dressed in a sleek, black bodysuit with pointed ears and a long bobbing tail. "I have to go see if Bettina needs any help."

When she returned with a tray of hot hors d'oeuvres, she saw that Shane was quite happily ensconced behind the bar with Ben. Carla had obviously recognized Shane and was busy entertaining him with her impression of a sinuous, purring cat.

Bettina took the tray from her hands. "You're due for a break. Go rescue Prince Charming from that cat."

Vanessa crossed the room and leaned against the bar. Shane scrunched up his face as he lifted his hat to scratch the top of his head.

Vanessa laughed with a shake of her head. "Can I get a drink here, or is this strictly a comedy review? A glass of wine, please."

"Red, of course," Shane said, pouring.

"Of course," Vanessa said, taking the glass from him with a smile of thanks.

Carla spoke up suddenly, sounding a bit petulant. "Isn't Todd coming tonight?" she asked with a sly glance at Vanessa. Ignoring Ben's frown, she turned to smile widely at Shane. "Come on," she demanded with a little pout. "You promised to dance with me."

He took the hand Carla held out to him, but his eyes, narrow with

curiosity, watched Vanessa's still face. As Carla tugged impatiently on his hand, he let himself be led to the center of the room, where several couples were dancing.

Vanessa watched as Carla moved close to Shane with a sinuous wiggle of her lithe body. She turned away.

Vanessa was listening absently to the conversation around her, running a finger around the rim of her glass, when suddenly Shane stood beside her.

"Where's the cat?" Vanessa asked, looking up at him, a smile playing on her lips.

Shane gave a shrug of disinterest. "Off to the sandbox, I think." He touched a finger to the scarlet drop of fake blood glistening at the corner of her mouth. "Who's Todd?" he demanded suddenly. "An old boyfriend?"

Vanessa moved her face away from the sting of his touch. "Ex-husband," she murmured.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You were married?"

She looked away from the curiosity lighting his eyes. "Briefly."

Shane studied the curve of her averted face. "If you want to tell me it's none of my business, feel free, but—what happened?"

"I found out our views on fidelity clashed badly." That was all she had meant to say, but found herself adding, "He told me he was going to a party one night." She looked down, swirling the wine in her glass before taking a drink. "He'd neglected to tell me it was a private party for two. Maybe if I'd just heard about it, I could have ignored it, or forgiven him. But to actually see him—" She broke off and turned away.

"It must have been rough," he said, his hand touching her arm lightly. "The guy must be a jerk."

Vanessa looked at him and grinned unexpectedly. "Actually, he is," she agreed. "My mistake lay in marrying him."

"Marriage is a mistake a lot of people make," Shane said, a frown cutting sharply across his brow.

"You say that as though you've had the experience."

"No," he said shortly. "That's something I plan to avoid. I learned all I need to know about marriage from observing my parents." He straightened up as he saw Carla coming down the stairs. "I feel a sudden cat allergy," he murmured. "Dance with me?"

"All right."

Shane took her in his arms, the soft, supple rhythm of the reggae beat guiding their movements. He held her close, the hardness of his chest against her. She felt surprisingly relaxed. She looked up to smile at him, but instead, burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"My wig. It's beginning to itch."

He pushed aside a curl that lay just above her breast. "You're much prettier as a blonde."

"Sort of blond," she corrected, left a little breathless by his touch. "That's what my mother used to call it."

Shane studied the expressions flitting across her face. "Your parents aren't living?"

Vanessa shook her head. "They died in a car accident, along with Marcie's parents—my brother and his wife."

"I'm sorry," Shane said gently.

Vanessa's eyes darkened briefly. "We've learned to live with it."

Vanessa relaxed against the solid wall of his chest, feeling his warm breath against her hair as his hands stroked her lower back, coming to rest on the curve of her hips. His hold tightened as he pulled her closer still. His hard thighs pushed up against the silky fabric of her dress gave her a sharp stab of excitement in the pit of her stomach. Alarmed by her growing arousal, she pushed away from him and stepped back.

"I—I have to go see if Bettina needs any help," she said, turning away. She glanced back with a quick, somewhat apologetic smile and hurried toward the stairs.

Damn it, she thought with a frown. It would be so easy to fall for him, she thought. But men like Shane Wilder were never without women. If she wasn't careful, she would end up being just one of many, and there was no way she was going to let that happen to her again. She had learned her lesson well.

"It WAS A great party, Bettina," Shane said as people began to leave. "Thanks for having me."

"We're glad you could be here," Bettina said. "No, no," she added adamantly as Shane began to help Vanessa pick up sticky glasses and overflowing ashtrays. "You two have done enough tonight. Leave everything as is."

Vanessa smothered a yawn. "I'd better be going before I fall asleep."

"Are you driving?" Shane asked.

She shook her head. "I never drive when I've been drinking. I'm taking a cab."

"I'll drive you," Shane stated firmly. "I haven't had anything stronger than ginger ale tonight—Ben can vouch for that."

"That's right, Van," Ben agreed. "Even my most exotic concoctions didn't tempt him. He's safe."

Vanessa looked at Shane warily. Oh, no, he's not, she thought with a silent conviction. But she accepted his offer.

It was a short drive, made in a comfortable silence. Shane stopped the car in front of her house.

"I'll see you to the door," he said, getting out.

The night was still, crisp and cool. At the door Vanessa turned her key in the lock. "Thank you for driving me home, Shane."

"I enjoy your company," he said, his voice low. "I want to see you again. Other than in the library," he added quickly, anticipating her response.

Vanessa studied his face under the porch light. "I don't think so," she said finally. "Shane—let's just be friends."

"Friends?" He ran a finger along the fine curve of her jaw. "And how do you say good-night to your friends?" he asked softly, his mouth moving closer to hers.

Vanessa swayed toward him, feeling the warmth of his breath against her lips. Then, with a little frown and a shake of her head, she stepped back and held out her hand. "Like this," she said. "Good night, Shane."

Chuckling, he took her fingers in his hand. "Good night, Vanessa," he said. Raising her hand to his lips, he pressed a kiss on the soft skin of her inner wrist, lingering on the pulse

that quickened to his touch. "I'll see you soon."

Vanessa watched him go down the steps before entering the house. Shane Wilder was a very tempting man.

"SOMETHING'S bothering Tommy," Shane pulled up a chair beside Vanessa's desk. "Do you have any idea what?"

Vanessa looked up from the report she was writing and shook her head. "I hardly saw him today," she said. She had been helping a grade-six class research eighteenth-century Canadian explorers during Shane's session with Tommy. Seeing the sharp line of concern cutting his brow, she asked, "What makes you think something is wrong?"

Shane ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. "He was different today—unattentive, sullen, even. His clothes were dirty and he obviously hadn't had a bath in a while. Something is wrong," he added with quiet conviction. "I've worked with him twice a week for over a month now," he said. He hesitated. "I know it might seem like I'm overreacting.... I don't know, maybe I am. But Bettina gave me his home address and suggested I go over and talk to his mother. Will you come with me, Vanessa?"

"Of course I will," she answered without hesitation.

THE SMALL, run-down duplex in the core of Winnipeg was an unhappy sight. The brick siding was ripped in spots and a rickety, unstable-looking veranda leaned drunkenly away from the front wall.

Vanessa climbed the front steps as Shane knocked loudly on the inner door.

A puffy-eyed young woman eventually came to the door. "What d'ya want?"

"We'd like to speak to Mrs. Hawkes," Shane said pleasantly. "Tommy's mother. Is she in?"

Her unkempt head shook negatively. "Next week, maybe. I don't know for sure."

"Are you looking after Tommy?" Shane asked, frowning.

"Yeah, sort of. His aunt was, but she got sick and had to go to the hospital, so I'm staying."

Vanessa gave Shane a quick, worried look. "Could we speak to Tommy, please?"

"He's out somewhere. Downtown, maybe." She obviously really didn't care. "What's with all the questions, anyway?"

Sensing her growing antagonism, Shane smiled placatingly. "We're just a bit concerned. Is there any way we can contact Tommy's mother?" he asked, his voice smooth with restraint.

"Uh-uh. She went back to Sterling for a funeral for one of her old friends. I don't have a phone number or nothin'."

"I see. What's the name of Tommy's aunt—the one in the hospital?"

"Alma—Alma Spence. You gonna go talk to her?"

"I might."

"Well, if you do, you tell her I'm not gonna stick around here baby-sitting that snotty-nosed brat much longer. Earl and me got things to do."

"Is... Earl staying here, too?" Shane asked.

"For a couple of days. Making up for lost time, y'know. Earl just got outta jail." She smiled archly. "Say—d'ya want to come in for a drink? I got some beer." She smiled at Shane and then looked doubtfully at Vanessa.

"No, thank you." Shane was still charmingly polite. "We have to be going." He turned away with Vanessa as the woman shut the door. "No wonder Tommy has been acting the way he has."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Go look for Tommy. His mother didn't leave that woman in charge. The aunt did, in what appears to have been an emergency." He opened the car door.

"I'm coming with you," she insisted. "I'm worried about Tommy, too, missing his mother and out wandering the streets alone because he dreads coming home to that—that half-sloshed bimbo. And I think," she added softly, with sudden insight, "that you know exactly what he's feeling."

A muscle twitched in the side of his face. "I do." He turned away from her, hiding distant shades of pain. "But it was my father I was missing and the woman wasn't a bimbo." He laughed shortly. "She was my mother. But half-sloshed nonetheless."

Vanessa took his hand and squeezed it in silent sympathy.

"We lived not far from here," Shane said suddenly. He was staring straight ahead as he began to talk. "In one of those old brick apartment buildings. It was all we could afford after my father left." He was

silent for a moment and then went on. "I thought it would be better when he was gone—no more fighting... but it wasn't. The constant tension was gone, but my mother was so bitter. My father ran off with another woman, and my mother never forgave him for that. She started to drink. Not every day, but often enough. I never knew how I'd find her when I got home from school. I started hanging around the arcades, growing more streetwise and a hell of a lot more cynical. I came damned close to ruining my life."

"But you didn't."

"My Uncle Henry straightened me out and turned me around at a time when no one else could be bothered." He kicked at a stone, watching it shoot ahead. "I was never able to repay him for all he did for me, but—"

"You can repay it in kind," Vanessa finished for him, sliding her hand through his arm. "Tommy is lucky to have you as a friend."

Shane looked at her and smiled, patting the hand that rested on his arm. "Let's just hope that we can find him."

THEY SPOTTED Tommy from the escalator in the mall in Eaton Place. He was hanging over the side of a case on display just outside a pet store, grinning at the puppy licking his hand. Instinctively Vanessa stayed back, letting Shane approach first.

"Hello, Tommy," he said, kneeling down beside the boy, his elbows on the edge of the case. "That's a nice little puppy, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Tommy gave him a sideways glance. "He keeps on licking me all the time."

"He must like you," Shane said reassuringly. "I went to your house tonight, Tommy," he stated casually.

Tommy looked down nervously, saying nothing.

"I'm really sorry that your mom isn't home," Shane continued. "And that your aunt is in the hospital. I'm sure it's hard for you."

Tommy scowled. "I won't go back." Tears began welling up in his eyes. "They get drunk an' stuff."

Shane stood up and held out his hand. "Would you like to come with us?"

Tommy was silent for a moment, staring at his hands. "I don't like people getting drunk."

"Neither do I, Tommy," Shane said.

Tommy looked up at him. "Do you get drunk?"

"No," Shane smiled, gently reassuring.

Tommy stared at him for a moment, his thin little face pale. He dropped his head abruptly with a stifled sob.

Vanessa put an arm around his shoulders and pulled him to her. "Oh, Shane," she murmured, her eyes dark with concern. "He's shaking like a leaf." Her arms tightened around him.

"My place is only a couple of minutes from here," Shane said.

Vanessa was about to suggest they take Tommy to her place, but his shuddering body and the silent tears she could see streaking his face told her he'd had enough. He didn't need the added stress of meeting Cora and

Marcie, no matter how sympathetic they would be.

SHANE LIVED on the top floor of an apartment building not far from where they had searched for Tommy. A large picture window overlooked a park and, beyond, bright city streets.

Vanessa helped Tommy out of his jacket. "You can stay here and get a good night's sleep and I'll see you in school tomorrow morning."

Tommy turned suddenly and burrowed against her shoulder, his fingers clutching her sweater. "I don't wanna stay without you."

As she held him to her, she felt his tears start anew. Smiling gently, she tightened her hold on him. "Then I'll stay." She looked across his head to Shane. "For Tommy," she added almost defiantly.

"I know that, Vanessa," he said as if annoyed that she would think otherwise. "It's all settled, then." He ruffled the boy's hair. "Come on, buddy, let's get some cushions and make you up a bed."

Vanessa was hanging up the phone when Shane came back into the room a little later. "Who'd you call?"

"My grandmother. I had to let her know I wouldn't be home tonight."

"I couldn't have left him there, Vanessa," he said quietly.

"I know. You did the right thing."

Shane nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe there's some way to get word to Tommy's mother, let her know what's been going on." He looked at her and smiled crookedly. "Thanks, Vanessa."

Vanessa returned his smile. "Anytime," she said lightly, sud-

denly aware of just how much she liked this man. "Shane, is your mother still living?"

He gave an abrupt shake of his head. "She died when I was eighteen," he said without expression. "From complications due to her—alcoholism."

"I'm sorry." Vanessa's eyes were soft with sympathy. "What about your father?"

"My father lives in Halifax with his second wife," Shane stated flatly. "The woman he left my mother for."

"When did you see him last?" Vanessa wondered just how much he would reveal to her.

"At my mother's funeral." His face was tight. "He wanted me to go back with him, but I refused. I got a part-time job, thanks to Uncle Henry, and a student loan to start university."

She had a feeling that he rarely, if ever, shared anything about his past. If it hadn't been for his concern over Tommy, it was unlikely that he would have said as much to her as he had. Shane Wilder, she was sure, was a very private man.

She forced herself to relax, hoping to dispel the tension she could feel in the pit of her stomach. She wished she had suggested they take Tommy back to her place. Staying here tonight was a mistake, she thought.

Shane stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the expressions flicker across her face. "Don't look so formidable," he said. "I promise to behave myself."

"Just see that you do, Mr. Wilder," Vanessa said sternly, exaggerating the tone she used to quell misbehaving students.

"Yes, Ms. Evans." Shane chuckled. He inclined his head toward the doorway. "C'mon, I changed the sheets on my bed," he said. "And put one of my sweat suits out for you to wear. You may have to do some sleeve rolling, but it should be comfortable enough."

Vanessa looked at him with a slight frown of dismay. "I'd rather sleep on the couch," she said. Sleeping in his bed would feel far too intimate.

"It's all arranged," Shane said. "You'll have more privacy that way, and besides, I'm usually up late. The couch is the best place for me."

Vanessa nodded. She determinedly pushed the feelings of uneasiness aside. She knew Shane well enough—she hoped—to be confident that he wouldn't try to take advantage of her position.

Her attraction toward Shane had grown considerably that evening. She glanced at him, her heartbeat quickening. After she'd witnessed his tender concern for Tommy, caught a glimpse of the vulnerability beneath his confident masculinity, she knew it was more than a physical thing—much more. And it made her uneasy.

Shane raised his eyebrows once he'd shown her to her room. "Well—good night. Call if you need anything."

"I'll be fine, thanks." She gave Shane one last look as he left the room.

VANESSA PULLED on the soft, well-worn sweat suit Shane had left for her, tying the drawstring securely. She could hear the murmur of the

TV and hoped Shane would stay in the living room watching it.

On impulse she tiptoed across the hall to his den and went to the bookcase. Hurriedly, she pulled one of his books from the shelf. She knew sleep wouldn't come easily, and if she was going to lie awake half the night, she may as well read. Besides, she thought, quietly leaving the room, it was about time she found out just what Matt Savage was all about.

VANESSA MET Shane at Echo's for lunch the next day so he could fill her in on his visit to the hospital.

"You look pensive," Shane stated as the waiter departed with their orders.

"Just thinking about Tommy," she said quickly. "What happened this morning?"

"Well," he began, "I went to the hospital and managed to see Alma without too much trouble. She's Tommy's aunt on his father's side. A very nice woman, by the way. Anyway, her angina had acted up. A bad attack. Nadine just happened to be visiting when it all happened, so Alma asked her to stay with Tommy."

"Doesn't she know what Nadine is like?"

"Alma put the blame on Earl and his friends. She was quite upset when she heard he was out of jail. It seems Nadine really isn't all that bad, except when Earl is around. Then she starts drinking and, well, we saw where that led."

Vanessa grimaced and nodded. "So—what's going to happen to Tommy?"

"Tommy's mother will be back on Monday. We managed to phone her

and she gave permission for Tommy to stay with me until she gets back."

"That's great, Shane!"

"Yeah." He smiled with satisfaction as the waiter served them. "I'm going to have to keep him entertained all weekend."

Vanessa nodded. "So?"

"So maybe I'll need some help."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Are you working on a ploy to get me to go out with you?"

Shane looked at her in mock surprise. "Of course not. I have only Tommy's best interests at heart. As my—friend—surely you'll help?"

Vanessa raised her hands in a gesture of defeat and smiled helplessly.

"Good," Shane said with evident satisfaction.

Vanessa nibbled on a piece of cheese, hoping she wasn't headed straight for trouble. "Oh, by the way," she said suddenly. "I read one of your books last night—*The Midnight Strangler*."

"I noticed it in my room," Shane said. "So?" He looked as though he was prepared for criticism.

She grinned widely. "I liked it—very much. But why did Matt have to walk away from Monica at the end? I liked her—they would have been good together."

"Matt knows he's not the marrying kind," Shane explained. "He leaves 'em before he hurts 'em."

"It sounds like a motto," Vanessa said, making a face. "Does that mean a different woman in each book?"

"So far. And I'll probably keep it that way."

Vanessa merely smiled and nodded. She wished, not for the first

time, that Shane was just a little less attractive.

*

HER WEEKEND had been spent almost entirely with Shane, and Tommy, of course. It had been fun. When had she last laughed as much?

The night before, they'd watched *Star Wars* movies at his place. Today, Marcie had joined them for a skating party. Vanessa couldn't lie to herself and pretend this weekend had been just for Tommy. She was falling for Shane.

Vanessa settled back to enjoy the ride through the city and finally out of it. Frost had trimmed the stretching furrows of black prairie soil bordering the highway.

About ten minutes outside the city limits, Shane turned onto a gravel driveway lined with magnificent oak trees. The house was old, with a gabled roof and diamond-shaped leaded-glass windowpanes that gleamed in the sunlight. A frozen creek, marsh grasses thick along its edge, lay at the bottom of a gently sloping hill to the back of the house.

"Shane—it's beautiful! Who does it belong to?" Vanessa asked.

"It's mine." He added, "This was my Uncle Henry's place. After he got sick a couple of years ago, I bought it from him. He let me have it for a fraction of what it's really worth."

It would make a beautiful home, Vanessa thought as they skated on the creek, a perfect place to raise a family. She stole a sidelong glance at Shane. From all he had said, it was likely the house would remain a bachelor's haven. What a waste, she thought.

"When do you think you'll be moving?"

He shrugged. "Soon, I hope. I've finished modernizing but I want to get the rooms painted before I actually move in."

The whole area had a lovely, unplanned, rugged look. Cattails and red willow bushes lined the creek. Oak and ash trees studded the bank.

Vanessa loved the swift gliding motion, the sound of the skate blades scraping against the ice.

Marcie grabbed the hockey sticks, handing Tommy the shorter stick. Tommy clutched the stick, ankles wobbling.

"He's having fun," Shane said with satisfaction. Marcie had put two pieces of wood on the ice near the far bank and they were shooting the puck between them.

Vanessa dug her blades into the ice. The creek wound in slow, lazy curves through thick stands of willow, narrowing at times to little more than a trail of ice, widening suddenly to pond size and dotted with black water-worn stumps of long-dead trees.

"This has done wonders for him, Shane. He seems so much more confident, less shy than he was."

They stopped, and Vanessa raised her head and looked at Shane. Slowly, his eyes holding hers, he lowered his head, his lips touching hers.

With a sigh, she gave herself to his kiss, savoring the soft heat of his mouth, kissing him back with a desire that grew in slow, delicious waves.

"Mmm," murmured Shane. "That was worth waiting for." He

ran a finger down the curve of her flushed cheek.

He was seducing her gently, and that was difficult to resist. Mesmerized by the desire she saw in his eyes, she stared back at him, knowing that her own eyes were misted with desire.

"You have to be the sexiest woman I've ever seen," he said, his voice low and husky.

Her breath came a little faster, and she swayed slightly and moaned softly against the flitting touch of his tongue against her lips. Vanessa's eyes closed on a sudden intake of breath and her hands came up to grasp the sides of his head. She thrust her body against him. This has to stop, she thought dazedly, trembling under his slow kisses.

With great effort, she lowered her hands to his shoulders and pushed at him.

"Shane," she murmured. "Please, Shane—no more."

He straightened and stared down at her, a frown forming. "Why?" he whispered thickly.

Her lashes swept down and she shook her head, feeling confused. "I—I don't want to."

Shane ran a finger over the curve of her cheek and hooked it under her chin. "I'm damned tempted to change your mind."

"And I'm almost tempted to let you," Vanessa admitted.

A dry smile twisted his lips. "Tell me one thing, Vanessa," he said suddenly. "Have you ever made love to anyone but your ex-husband?"

Vanessa turned away from his speculative gaze. "No," she said shortly.

A smile eased over Shane's face and he nodded to himself. "Then, in a sense, the next time will be like the first, won't it?" He put his hands on her shoulders. "The best things are worth waiting for. And, Vanessa..." He kissed her softly on the lips. "We could have the best."

Things were moving fast. Too fast.

*

SNOW FELL softly, like a sigh in the darkness. It covered the streets and yards, clung to barren branches, and it enchanted.

Vanessa had seen a lot of Shane over the past couple of weeks, both in school and in her home. She sighed. She wanted him more and more with each passing day.

She stood by the entrance to Echo's for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior of the restaurant. She could see that Shane was already seated. He was holding the menu, one finger tapping against the edge as he stared absently into the candle flickering in front of him.

Her heartbeat quickened as he looked up and saw her, his smile warm and welcoming.

She hung up her coat and approached the table slowly, feeling a little bemused. *I really do love him*, she thought dazedly, sitting across from him.

"Hi," she said, looking at him directly, her smile tentative.

"Hi." He smiled in return, eyeing her closely. "Vanessa—is something wrong?"

Everything, she thought with a stab of dismay. "No," she said. "I'm just hungry." She opened her

menu and made a pretense of reading it. "What are you having?"

"A steak sandwich," he answered after another searching look at her face. "And you?"

"French onion soup. And a salad, I guess." As she closed the menu and laid it to one side, the waiter came to take their orders.

Shane leaned back in his chair. "I've been wondering what to get Tommy for Christmas. I thought—" He broke off as the waiter placed their orders in front of them.

"You thought what?" Vanessa asked when they were alone again.

"Well, I'll have to talk to his mother first, but I thought he might like to have a dog."

"I think that's a great idea. Remember how he was with that puppy in the pet store?"

Shane nodded. "That's what gave me the idea. That, and—"

"And?" she prompted, stirring her soup with her spoon.

He shrugged. "It's just that I remember wanting a dog badly when I was about his age." His eyes took on a distant look. "It's funny—I could see that dog so clearly, it was almost real to me. I was so sure I'd find it in a basket under the Christmas tree, complete with a big red bow around its neck."

"But you didn't get it," Vanessa stated quietly, reading the look of dismay on his face.

He smiled sardonically. "It's funny how those childhood disappointments stay with us." His lips tightened fractionally. "Holidays always seemed to bring out the worst in my parents. The fighting would escalate and—" He stopped abruptly and cut into his sandwich.

Remembering her own happy childhood and the magic she and her brother had felt each Christmas morning, Vanessa felt a stab of sympathy for the boy Shane had been. She pushed aside her half-finished soup. "What are your plans for the holiday?"

He shrugged. "I've got a couple of possibilities, but nothing definite yet."

Vanessa poked at her salad. "Gran wants me to ask you to come over to our place." She tried to sound casual.

"I'd like that," he responded instantly. "Providing the invitation comes from you as well as your grandmother."

She looked up. "Of course it does," she said with sincerity. "We'd all love to have you."

Shane reached across the table and took her hand in his, squeezing her fingers gently. "Count me in," he said, his eyes smiling into hers.

CHRISTMAS ARRIVED along with the first real cold spell of the season. Vanessa opened the door to Shane, who came in with a rush of cold air, his arms laden with gaily wrapped packages.

"Santa Claus, I presume," she said, taking the packages from him.

"This is one Santa Claus who's glad to forgo a trip around the world in favor of sitting in front of a warm fire," he said, rubbing his hands together. "It's cold out there!" He shrugged off his parka, hanging it in the closet. He turned to Vanessa, his eyes warm in his cold-reddened cheeks. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she returned, her lashes sweeping down. She felt his hands on

her shoulders and looked up to meet his eyes. He dropped a quick kiss on her lips.

"Lead me to that fire."

Cora and Marcie were waiting for them in the living room. There was a fire burning brightly opposite the corner where a tall, spreading evergreen sat. Vanessa gazed at the glittering star, remembering the year her father had brought it home and how he had lifted her high into the air so she could put it on top of the tree. Then there were her mother's favorite ceramic snowflakes, and the roughly carved and painted reindeer David had made when he was younger than his daughter was now. Memories...

What were Shane's memories of Christmas? Vanessa wondered, watching him join in easily. He had said the fighting between his parents had usually worsened over the holidays.

Marcie carefully placed the new armload of gifts under the tree and sat back on her heels, admiring the colorful stack under the tree with satisfaction.

Vanessa stood quietly at Shane's side, staring into the fire. It felt so good, so right to have him there. It's as if he belongs with us, she thought, a wistful smile curving her lips. She stole a glance at his strong profile, feeling a sudden rush of love for him. Wanting badly to touch him, she put a hand on his arm and squeezed her fingers briefly.

Instantly her hand was covered by his, holding it against corded muscles. "I want to thank you," he said, his voice low, "for asking me into your home for Christmas."

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered, her eyes sliding away from his lest he see just how glad she was. This man made her feel so very vulnerable. I love him so much, she thought.

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Van!" Marcie, cheeks flushed with excitement, got up and gave her a big hug.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie." Vanessa returned the hug and gave her an affectionate kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Gran." Vanessa stooped to kiss Cora's cheek.

"Merry Christmas, dear." Cora smiled fondly at her granddaughter.

"Aren't you going to wish me a merry Christmas, too?" Shane asked plaintively.

"Merry Christmas, Shane."

"What—don't I get a kiss? Just a little one," he coaxed, inclining his head and tapping his cheek with a lean forefinger. "That's all I ask."

"Go on, Vanessa." Cora laughed. "Give the poor man a kiss."

He turned his head as her lips touched his cheek, capturing them with his, and kissed her with a thoroughness that left her flushed and breathless.

"Merry Christmas, Vanessa," he said, a soft, teasing gleam in his eyes.

Vanessa looked at Cora, who was smiling with obvious satisfaction. Marcie's eyes sparkled with laughter.

Vanessa sat down rather abruptly, feeling as if they were ganging up on her. Cora and Marcie, she knew, were excited because they thought wedding bells weren't far off. She would have to tell them that was the last thing they should expect. Whatever her relationship with Shane was, whatever it might become, he had

made it clear that marriage did not enter into his plans for the future.

"All those presents just sitting under that tree waiting to be ripped open," Marcie said with a groan. "I can hardly stand it."

"Then let's get at them," Vanessa said, glad for the diversion.

As Marcie sorted through the mound of gifts under the tree, Shane slipped out of the room.

"This is for you, Cora," he said on his return, placing a loosely wrapped bird cage at her feet. "I hope you like it."

Eyes widening with pleasure, Cora slipped off the blue bow holding the silver paper in place. A tiny yellow canary hopped onto one of the perches and regarded her with bright black eyes. "Oh, Shane!" Cora exclaimed with delight. "He's lovely. Thank you!"

Shane looked pleased.

"Shane's turn," Marcie said, handing him a small package. "It's from me."

Shane smiled with open affection at the girl as he sat on the couch and opened the present. It was a bottle of after-shave. He removed the top and sniffed. "You've got good taste. Thanks."

"Give him my present next, Marcie," Cora insisted. "It's in the corner—that one." She pointed.

Cora had knitted him a thick wool sweater in a deep royal blue. Shane was obviously pleased as he examined it. "Thank you, Cora," he said, kissing her warmly on the cheek.

Marcie opened her gift from Shane next. He had given her a small plush unicorn. Around its neck was a delicate gold chain. Marcie unfasted it and held it up, her face

flushed with pleasure. "It's—they're beautiful."

Another thoughtful gift, Vanessa mused. He had unerringly appealed to both the child and the woman in Marcie.

Marcie knelt in front of the tree again. "Ah—here's one for you, Aunt Van. From Shane," she added. Her eyes curious, she sat back on her heels to watch Vanessa open it. "C'mon, Aunt Van! Rip into it!"

Laughing, Vanessa did just that. Inside the box was a brass-rimmed crystal butterfly just larger than the palm of her hand. Exclaiming softly with pleasure, she held it up to catch the light. A spatter of rainbows whirled around the room.

"Oh, Shane—it's stunning. Thank you!" She smiled warmly at him. "Is his name Bertie?" she asked teasingly.

"It did cross my mind," he admitted, chuckling. His eyes held hers.

Vanessa looked away from him. Oh, Shane, she thought with dismay, why do you have to be so utterly irresistible?

"This is yours from Aunt Van." Marcie handed Shane a large, cream-colored envelope sashed with red ribbon.

Vanessa held her breath while he opened it.

The envelope contained an eight-by-ten photograph of a puppy. Shane pulled it out and looked at it, then at her, puzzled.

"That's Sasha," Vanessa explained a little nervously. "An Alaskan malamute cross—she's two months old. I arranged with the owners to keep her until you move out of the city. But if you would

rather not have a dog, well, I can cancel—”

“Don’t you dare!” A pleased expression was spreading across Shane’s face. “Thank you, Vanessa. Thank you very much.”

Vanessa returned his smile with relief. She hadn’t been all that sure that he really wanted a dog, but he’d left her with no doubt that he was happy with the gift.

After the rest of the gifts had been opened and the colorful debris cleared away, Vanessa glanced at the clock on the mantel. “The Blakelys will be here for Christmas dinner soon,” she said as she stood to go to the kitchen.

“Let me lend a hand,” Shane said. He got up and stretched lithely, following her out of the room.

Shane put his hands on her shoulders. “Vanessa.”

“Mmm?” For a moment she leaned against him, feeling his breath stir her hair.

“Thank you again,” he said. “For Sasha. And for a most memorable Christmas morning.” He kissed her softly, savoring her lips, his hands tightening as she sighed.

“Indulge me,” he whispered, his eyes burning into hers. “It’s Christmas.”

With a quiet moan, Vanessa raised her lips to meet his, releasing her desire for him. His lips welded to hers with a passion that made her quiver. He groaned against her mouth, “You’re driving me wild. I want you so damned bad.”

He kissed her again, his hips thrusting forcefully against hers. Then, with an abruptness that left her dazed and trembling, he pushed her away from him.

“Enough of that,” he said thickly. He reached out to run a hand caressingly over her arm. “You’re worth waiting for,” he said roughly. “And when we do make love—” His kiss was brief but explosive with the promise of passion to come.

When we do make love, Vanessa thought as he moved away from her again. It was as inevitable as night following day.

AFTER Christmas dinner with Bettina, Ben and their daughter, Haili, the talk turned to future plans.

“By the way, Marcie,” Bettina turned to the girl. “Are you still coming to spend New Year’s Eve with Haili while Ben and I go out?”

“Yeah, sure. Should I spent the night?”

“It’s probably best,” Bettina nodded. “We’ll probably be quite late. Is that all right with you, Van?”

“Of course. Are you still going to Carla’s party?”

“Yes—they’re usually a lot of fun,” Bettina added. “Shane—she invited you as well. Are you going?”

Shane shook his head. “I’ve already made other plans.”

Other plans with whom? Vanessa wondered, struggling to hide her disappointment.

Shane got up shortly afterward, giving Cora and Marcie each a fond kiss on the cheek before departing.

Vanessa waited with him in the front hall as he put on his coat, and she wondered when she would see him again. It won’t be New Year’s Eve, she thought, her stomach twisting.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her slowly. “What I want to

do," he murmured, his breath warm on her lips, "is take you upstairs and make love to you, over and over again. A perfect way to end a perfect day." He kissed her again, his mouth hard, demanding the passion she willingly gave. Abruptly, he broke away.

"I've got to go," he muttered tightly. "While I still can." He touched a finger to her lips, his smile brooding. "Don't make me wait much longer," he said, turning to open the door. "See you soon." With a wave, he was gone into the cold night.

Vanessa shut the door behind him, leaning against it for a moment, giving herself time to recover. See you soon, he'd said. How soon? Tomorrow? The next day? Next week? She locked the door and turned away.

*

THE HOUSE seemed unnaturally quiet on New Year's Eve after Cora and Marcie left for their respective parties. Vanessa's book failed to hold her attention and she let it slide from her hands onto the floor beside her as she sipped her wine, staring into the flickering flames of the fire. Picking up the poker, she jabbed morosely at the logs, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

The doorbell sounded suddenly. Startled, she got up. Turning on the porch light, she peered cautiously outside. Eyes widening, she stepped back and flung open the door.

"Shane!" she said in pleased surprise.

"Hi." He smiled crookedly, arms cradling a bulk under his parka as he came inside, bringing a rush of cold air with him. "I brought someone to

see you," he said, opening his zipper. Bright black eyes looked at her and a small furry body wriggled ecstatically.

Vanessa took the puppy into her arms, laughing.

"I was hoping you'd be home," he said, shrugging off his parka. "If not, I was going to brave Carla's party and see if you were there."

"What happened to your plans for the evening?"

"I cancelled," he said, his eyes holding hers. "I phoned and explained that it was only fair to tell her that there was someone else I would rather spend the evening with."

Curling a finger under her chin, he lifted her head and kissed her softly. "Listen—I've got an idea. There's a full moon tonight," he began. "And the sky is perfectly clear. Would you like to go cross-country skiing?"

She grinned suddenly. "Actually, it sounds wonderful. Where?"

"At my place—along the creek."

She was ready in less than ten minutes.

VANESSA fitted her skis into his parallel tracks, gliding easily along behind him. The air was sharp and cold, silent except for the swishing thrust of their skis.

Shane dug his poles in the snow, took a few more gliding strides and then stopped.

Vanessa shivered, suddenly feeling the cold. "As much as I'm enjoying this, I think maybe we'd better head back."

"That's probably a good idea," Shane agreed readily. "The thought of curling up in front of the fireplace is suddenly very appealing."

It sounded fantastic. And if he reached for her...

"YOU'VE BEEN painting," Vanessa commented, looking around the living room as Shane knelt in front of the fireplace.

"I had someone come out last week to do it," Shane said, striking a match.

He had also added a big comfortable-looking couch, which faced the fireplace, and a plush blue and cream-colored area rug. There was a colorful clutter of cushions scattered on the floor near the hearth.

The puppy crept close to the fire. Shane and Vanessa laughed as the puppy regarded the flames suspiciously, ears pointed sharply forward. Turning around, she yawned with a little squeak, lay down and closed her eyes.

"Happy New Year," Shane said, his eyes smiling into Vanessa's.

"Happy New Year," Vanessa murmured. The desire she felt for Shane, the anticipation of the kisses she knew would come, simmered in her. She twisted around until she was lying curled on her side. *I love him so much*, she thought with a strong rush of feeling.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

Her lashes swept down then up again as she looked at him directly. "How much I'd like to kiss you." She heard his sudden intake of breath, saw desire glaze his eyes.

Vanessa slowly pushed herself up. Feeling warm, sensuous, she put her hands on his shoulders and leaned forward, kissing him with all the passion she felt.

Shane pulled away with a groan. "You're driving me wild, woman," he muttered. "I want you so damned bad."

Vanessa pressed her palms hard against his muscled back. "So what are you waiting for?" she whispered. She felt his muscles tense.

His thumbs stroked the hair back from her forehead as his eyes searched hers. Then he pulled her into his arms.

Lost to his touch, she returned his passion with uncurbed abandon. Their lovemaking was perfect, beautiful and yet wildly passionate, everything she had known it would be and so much more.

"I love you so much," she whispered and pressed her lips to his. Tears of joy slid down her cheeks and he kissed them away, holding her close in his arms.

As she drifted off to sleep, he lay awake, staring into corners that darkened as the fire slowly faded and died.

WHEN SHE awoke, she stretched luxuriously.

Cupping her head in his hands, Shane thumbed the hair back from her forehead, smiling softly. "Good morning," he murmured. He kissed each cheek, then touched his lips to hers. "Last night was wonderful," he said. "You, lovely lady, are fantastic."

Vanessa wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder, breathing deeply his warm, male scent. "I love you so much," she whispered, her voice trembling.

She felt him stiffen slightly.

"Shane—is something wrong?"

He looked at her, brows arching over heavy-lidded eyes. "Wrong? Of course not." He kissed her gently. "Is that better?" He smiled.

It was, for a moment, but when he released her, the feeling of unease started again. When she tried to broach the subject, the words stuck in her throat.

They talked only of unimportant things on the drive back to her place.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asked as he walked her to the door, hoping fervently that he would stay.

He hesitated. "No—no, thanks," he said. "I've got something planned for this afternoon."

Vanessa hid her disappointment. Nothing this morning was turning out like it should.

"Vanessa—" He put his hands on her shoulders. "I—" He stopped with a little shake of his head. "I'll call you." He kissed her softly. "See you," he said, with a funny little smile. Then he was gone.

Tears sprang to Vanessa's eyes. Last night had been so beautiful—how could it have turned into this?

*

NEARLY THREE weeks had passed since she had last seen Shane. From remarks Tommy made, she knew that he was out of town, keeping in touch with the boy through letters and postcards. Where he had gone, she didn't bother to find out. It would make no difference to the pain and anger churning inside of her.

She showered and dressed, then drank a cup of coffee with Cora, trying to make cheerful small talk, wanting to dispel the worried look she saw in her grandmother's eyes.

"I've got to be going," she said, glancing at the clock on the wall as she swallowed the last of her coffee.

Cora watched her leave, a concerned line evident across her brow.

The roads were slippery with new snow. Vanessa stopped at a red light, reaching to adjust the volume on the radio. A sudden, violent crash from behind sent her car skidding into the intersection. Her head whipped forward and then back. Stunned, she sat uncomprehendingly, scarcely hearing the blare of a horn and screech of brakes as another car, traveling through the intersection, rammed into the far side of her car.

The force thrust her hard against the door and her head slammed against the window. The last thing she heard was the sound of breaking glass as she fell into darkness.

SHE WAS LYING on a hospital bed next morning, bruised and shaken. Her head was cut a bit where she hit the window—there'd be a bruise, the doctor said, but the cuts weren't serious.

Vanessa succumbed to painkillers and a darkened, quiet room, sleeping the afternoon away after her grandmother's visit. She picked listlessly at her supper, finally pushing the tray away with a grimace of disgust. Her head ached and the left side of her body was beginning to stiffen. She leaned back against the pillow, closing her eyes.

"Vanessa."

Her eyes flew open and she stared at Shane standing inside the doorway, bouquet of pink roses in hand.

"What do you want?" she demanded in a thin whisper.

"I came to see you," he said, coming closer to the bed. His eyes were narrow with concern as they swept over her pale face. "How are you?" he asked, putting the roses on the table at her bed.

Her voice was laced with sarcasm. "What do you care?"

He took a step closer, a sharp line cutting his brow. "I do care, Vanessa. I—"

Her voice rose sharply. "It's about three weeks too late. Just get away from me."

Shane's face was still and inscrutable. He moved as though to touch her.

"No!" Pain shot through her body as she jerked away from his hand, and she cried out. She put a hand to her head as tears of pain and anger coursed hotly down her face. "Leave me alone," she said through gritted teeth. "Just—stay away from me."

Shane let out a harsh breath, his voice tight when he spoke again. "I can see you're in no condition to talk to me. I'll go." For a fleeting moment, his hand rested on her shoulder and he turned to walk away.

Vanessa sat up and snatched up the flowers he had left, throwing them at his retreating back. Whimpering from the pain, she fell back against the pillow, covering her face with her hands as sobs tore from her throat.

WHEN SHE returned home from the hospital, she slipped into a lethargic state of emotional numbness, spending her days lying in her darkened room with the radio a soft blur of background noise.

Cora came up to her room late one morning carrying a tray. She went to the windows and tugged open the curtains.

"I'm worried about you, Vanessa," Cora said in her forthright manner. "It's more than just bumps and bruises."

"Gran—I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, I think it's about time that you did," Cora said firmly. "I know it's to do with Shane."

Vanessa shook her head wearily. "He's made it clear enough that he doesn't want me or—or love me." She swallowed and blinked back unwelcome tears. "I don't need to hear the reasons."

"I think you're making a mistake, Vanessa. Go talk to him," Cora pleaded gently. "Will you, dear? For me?"

Vanessa sighed and nodded reluctantly. She'd do it for Cora.

THREE DAYS after her talk with Cora, Vanessa went to see Shane. Going quickly to the door, she knocked loudly while she still had the nerve.

Shane opened the door almost immediately. For a moment his face reflected surprise, but then it settled into impassive lines. "Vanessa," he said, his voice polite and expressionless. "Please—come in."

"Thank you," Vanessa murmured, stepping inside. She shrugged her jacket into his waiting hands.

Sasha trotted into the room, stopping with ears cocked to peer brightly at Vanessa. The puppy ran toward her, rear end wriggling in ecstasy as she licked at Vanessa's hand. At least one of them is glad to see

me, she thought, rubbing the thick ruff on the back of the dog's neck. As she stood up, she glanced at Shane's face.

"Vanessa..." He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. He touched one hand to the faint bruise on her temple, his eyes darkening. "I hurt you," he whispered huskily. "I'm sorry."

Vanessa pulled away from his touch and stepped back, holding her arms against her chest and looking around frantically. The house had come to life with carefully placed furniture, pictures and plants. A new thick area rug lay on the gleaming oak floor in front of the fireplace, an overstuffed couch and two arm-chairs placed on its edge.

Why did I come? she wondered with a rising sense of panic. Suddenly it was too much to bear, waiting for him to deliver the final blow. She had been crazy to come.

"I've got to go," she said. "I shouldn't have come."

Shane's hand snaked out and closed around her wrist. "Wait," he said. "Don't go. I've got a lot of explaining to do. Please—stay and listen."

Vanessa jerked her hand from his grasp, averting her head from the intensity of his eyes. She started to walk away.

"I love you, Vanessa."

The low, intensely spoken words stopped her and she spun around to face him. "You—love me?" Her voice rose with indignation. "You can say that after the way you treated me?" Her eyes flashed with anger. "You had to know how much you hurt me. How dare you say you love me?"

"That night we stayed here," he began, his eyes sweeping to the floor beside the hearth and darkening in memory, "I realized that no one would ever feel as—right, as you did in my arms. I knew then how much I loved you."

Vanessa slowly made her way to a chair and sat down.

"I—panicked," he admitted with difficulty, a rueful light in his eyes. "I held you in my arms that night, knowing that's where I wanted you, always. And that meant marriage. I couldn't offer you anything less." He paused, his eyes darkening as he frowned. "All I could hear was my parents screaming at each other, day in and day out, and my father throwing up his hands and asking the same question just before he'd storm out of the house—'Why the hell did I ever marry you in the first place?'"

Vanessa put a hand on Shane's and squeezed gently. "That was them, Shane; not us."

"I knew that, rationally." He sighed. "But I kept thinking, what was there to prevent it from happening to us? I panicked." His lips twitched.

"You should have talked to me about it." Her voice was low with the remnants of pain.

"I know, sweetheart, I know." He took her hand in his and held it firmly, his thumb moving in soft, stroking circles on her skin. "I went to Halifax—to see my father." His words were unexpected. "I realized I needed to talk to him in order to free myself from the past so I would be free to love you...to marry you." He caught the look of love in her eyes. "Don't look at me like that,

sweetheart," he said roughly. "Or I won't be able to finish."

Vanessa smiled, feeling joy and confidence grow in her heart. "Go on," she said softly.

"When I got to Halifax, I found my father in the hospital about to undergo heart surgery. That's one of the reasons I was gone as long as I was."

"Oh, Shane! Is he all right?"

"He's fine now—everything went well," Shane assured her. "He's well on his way to a complete recovery. We had a long talk," he continued. "Several, actually. And once I was able to let go of my stubborn adolescent grudges, I found a man I like and admire."

"I'm glad, Shane."

He smiled. "So am I. Anyway, he told me about his marriage to my mother... things I didn't know before. He said they married because my mother was pregnant—she miscarried shortly after the wedding. By the time they realized they should separate, I was on the way and they made the classic mistake, staying together for my sake. They both loved me—they just grew to hate the sight of each other." His lips twisted slightly and he gave his head a little shake.

"Is he happy now?" Vanessa asked.

Shane nodded. "He is. Irene—his wife—is a lovely woman. He told me that when he met her, he could no longer bear the emptiness of his life with my mother. For the first time I was able to understand. I told him about you, about the doubts I had..."

"And did he lay them to rest?"

"I think so." His eyes searched her, promise in their light gray depths. "I know so," he amended softly. "Will you marry me, Vanessa?"

Her eyes brimmed with tears of happiness. "Yes, Shane," she whispered. "I'll marry you."

He pulled her into his arms, rubbing his cheek against her hair, and let out a shaky breath. "I was afraid you'd stopped loving me."

She raised her head and smiled mistily at him. "I never could."

"The feeling is mutual, lovely lady," he said roughly. He laid his lips on hers, his kiss soft with love and promise.

He looked at her with love glowing in his eyes, seeming more handsome than he had ever been. The sight of him took her breath away—and caused a tiny stirring of panic.

Shane read the flickerings of doubt on her face. "What is it, sweetheart?" he asked, gently stroking her hair.

She pushed back a bit and looked at him, wondering how to start. She sighed. "Todd loved me," she said. "Enough to marry me, but—" She stopped and bit her bottom lip, unsure of how to continue. "He couldn't resist the—the lure of women who found him attractive." Her lashes swept up and she looked at Shane directly, her lips forming a wry smile. "I'd be happier if you weren't quite so handsome," she confessed a little self-consciously. "I'm—I'm so afraid it might happen all over again."

"It won't," Shane assured her. "Never."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked, remnants of an old pain shadowing her eyes.

"Because I'm not Todd. I want to marry you, raise a family with you, grow old with you...loving you and only you all the years in between. I promise you that, love."

"Oh, Shane," Vanessa whispered. She buried her face in his shoulder and clung tightly, shaken by the love she saw in his eyes. His arms closed around her and he rubbed his chin against her hair.

"Okay now?" he asked.

She pushed back a bit and nodded with a warm, loving smile. Vanessa gave a soft little laugh. "Can this be the same man who was so deathly afraid of marriage?" she teased.

"I discovered I'm more afraid of life without you," he said, his eyes

darkening. "I love you too much to ever be without you again. Any remaining doubts?"

She sighed happily, pressing her face into the crook of his neck and placing short kisses along his jaw. Her soft hands moved over him, caressing lovingly. "It's not doubts that I feel stirring, Shane Wilder," she said, her face alive with laughter as she moved against him.

He stroked her satin skin leisurely, his eyes darkening with desire and closing as his mouth found hers. His kiss was long and hard. "I love you, Vanessa," he murmured against her throbbing lips.

"And I love you, Shane," she whispered shakily.

"Always?" he asked intently.

"Always," she promised.

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STAR SIGNS—SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER



LIBRA September 23–October 22

Now is a time for you to make some pretty big decisions. Don't rely on others to set things in motion for you, otherwise you'll find you are getting nowhere! You may feel a little tired or off-color midmonth but be patient and try to take things a bit slower. It's not always easy but it is possible!



SCORPIO October 23–November 22

There could be a change of direction on the job front now so try and take things as they come. Uncertainty isn't easy to live with, but by the end of the month you'll have to learn to cope with it without worrying too much.



SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

The social side of your life seems to be very slow at the moment, but new hobbies and interests lead to an exciting time midmonth. A surprise holiday gives you the lift you need—someone close to you arranges a break from it all.



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Nagging worries need sorting out because you seem to be spending too much time dwelling on them. Now is the time to sort yourself out. This should, in the long run, lead to a much more harmonious time for you and loved ones.



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

An unexpected visitor appears at the start of the month, and you both have a lot to catch up on! You'll find yourself joining in with new people midmonth and a change of direction in your life. Make the most of this exciting time!



PISCES February 23–March 22

Home is where you want to be this month, and it's a good time to get started on all that decorating you've been meaning to do. A peaceful time will probably do you the world of good as life's been a bit hectic lately, so make the most of it while you can!

STAR SIGNS (continued)



ARIES March 23-April 22

A fresh start awaits you on the work front when your ambitions could well change direction, and not necessarily for the better! Be very careful before you make any major decisions—discretion is the name of the game this month.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

A determined feeling surrounds you this month, and you'll find others trying to persuade you to change your mind about matters close to you. Don't become argumentative with them; it won't lead anywhere! A friend needs a helping hand this month and you'll find you are more than able to give it.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

You may find that you get more and more involved in group activities and outings this month. Someone close to you gives you some help and guidance in connection with a loved one, so take heed!



CANCER June 22-July 22

You feel a need to find yourself a bit of freedom, so why not do something about it! Book yourself on that get-away-from-it-all weekend you've been promising yourself and don't feel guilty about not taking anyone else with you!



LEO July 23-August 22

A close friend or partner is in an awkward mood now, and they may blow hot or cold without warning, so watch out! A good idea is to have a day out with another friend and maybe talk over your problems with them. They may even come up with a good solution!



VIRGO August 23-September 22

This will be an excellent month for you so make the most of it! An unexpected surprise makes things even more exciting and couldn't really have come at a better time. A commitment needs to be sorted out later on in the month, but things should really go quite smoothly!

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BE MINE, VALENTINE • Vicki Lewis Thompson



Roxie didn't believe for one moment that she and Tucson contractor Hank Croddock were destined to become lovers, no matter what her eccentric old friend, Charlie Hartman, claimed. After all, Charlie thought he was St. Valentine himself. But it soon became apparent that Charlie, or whoever he was, knew more about the affairs of the heart than these mere mortals.

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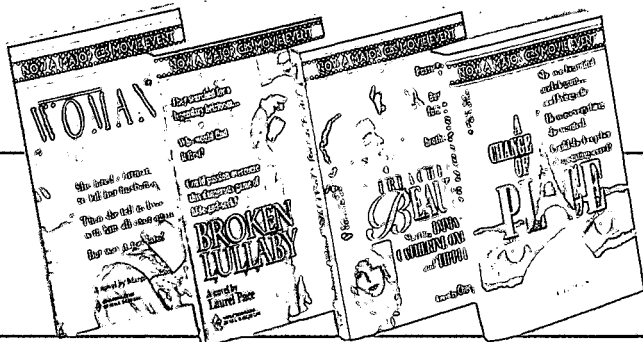
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ACROSS

1. Stage performer
6. Aware of
10. Attempt
14. Long for
15. Bonus
16. Ripped
17. Rustic
18. Water container
19. Over the hill: abbr.
20. Make clear
22. Serious
24. Pitch
26. Lounges
27. Vascular organ
31. Views
34. Regions
35. Process, as film
39. Foot

appendages

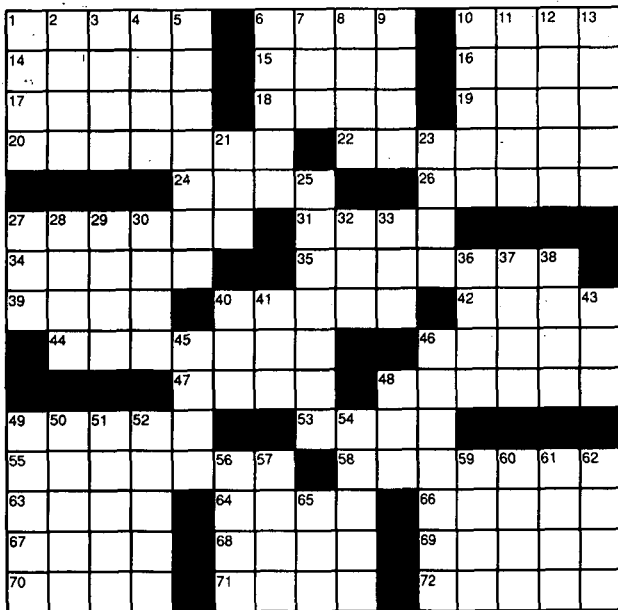
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47. Ore deposit
48. Muss
49. Ancient calculators
53. Scorch
55. Finds
58. Sits in on
63. Blue flower
64. Uncouth fellow
66. Worship
67. Express
68. Unadorned
69. River embankment
70. Border
71. Went quickly
72. Difficulties

DOWN

1. Land measure
2. Essential point
3. Waterproofed canvas, for short
4. Egg-shaped
5. Recounts
6. Uncovers
7. Novel
8. Oak
9. Gumbo vegetable
10. Position
11. Drying cloth
12. Ascended
13. Pants holders
21. Charged particle

23. Get up
25. Makes tranquil
27. Occupied a bench
28. Underpinning
29. Grimace
30. Loosen
32. Reply of consent
33. Adam's wife
36. Place
37. Sportsman's advantage
38. Ring
40. Summer sign
41. Finish
43. Malt beverage
45. Long crack

46. Doorways
48. Make lace
49. Animated
50. Drilled
51. Scoring a hole in one
52. Hindu social group
54. Auriculate
56. Wanes
57. Cleaning substance
59. Paradise
60. ____ Scotia
61. Residue
62. Beholds
65. Mine yield



**Solution on page 112
of this issue.**

Presenting the "Harlequin on TV"

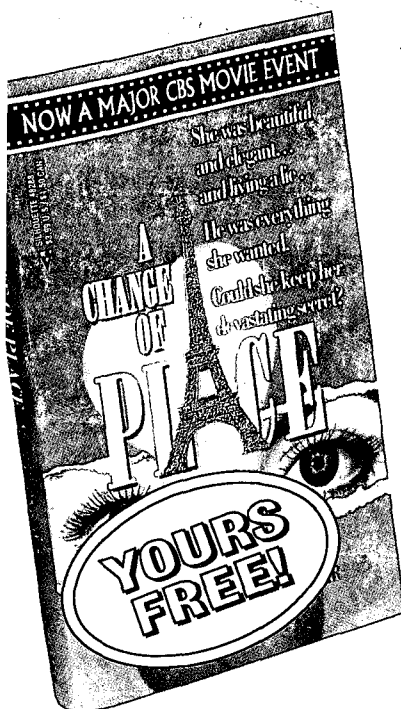
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